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Rachel Sachs Riverwood
Antioch University New England

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DIVINE NARCISSISM: RAISING A SECURE MIDDLE-AGED ADULT

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Antioch University New England

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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August 2021

DIVINE NARCISSISM: RAISING A SECURE MIDDLE-AGED ADULT

This dissertation, by Rachel Sachs Riverwood, has
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Antioch University New England
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Utilizing an arts-based feminist autoethnographic stance and method, this dissertation is an evocative exploration of the process and experience of attempting to develop a cohesive identity and build a secure attachment to the self. The author uses countercultural methods—prioritizing and centralizing her experience and uncovering and acting in defiance of oppressive norms—to identify and experience their impact on her identity and intra- and interpersonal relationships. Various tensions are explored, including the suppression of self and desire, self-objectification, fearful-avoidant attachment, and shame; and their influence on engaging in emotional and sexual intimacy is examined. Critique on the role of female socialization—especially caretaking and objectification—and research on undermining women’s power, identity, and self-advocacy are presented. The effects of culture, feminism, monogamy, and ethical non-monogamy on the experience of a middle-aged woman is highlighted. The use and experience of creativity, nature, shamanic practices, interpersonal experimentation, and autoethnography in accepting and moving through fear is also presented. Implications and tools to develop a more empowered and cohesive identity, attachment to the self, exploring intimacy, and conscious relationships; and guidance on overcoming self-objectification, dysfunctional relationship patterns, projection, and denial are included for therapists as well as individuals and their partners, family, and friends.

Key Words: Autoethnography, Arts Based Research, Attachment, Childfree, Emotionally Focused Therapy, Feminism, Identity, Middle-age, Objectification Theory, Trauma

Introduction

There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable.

-Butler (2004)

Statement of the Problem

Attachment and identity insecurity leads to intra- and inter- personal conflict throughout the lifespan, especially in intimate relationships, and more specifically, emotional and physical intimacy. For women, adding a lifetime of systemic oppression regarding their personhood, bodies, and the societal imperative to care for others exacerbates identity and attachment insecurity; thus fostering intra- and inter- relational struggles. The denial of self and focus on others' needs can create dependencies and disappointment, which lead to dysfunctional relational dynamics, specifically when self-sacrifice leads to expectations that partners do not meet.

In my experience as a relational therapist, other issues raised consistently by women in couples therapy are a lack of desire and a longing for increased intimacy. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1964), in the intimacy versus isolation phase and during the transition to adulthood, the capacity to achieve intimacy is highly correlated with the development of a secure identity (Arseth et al., 2009; Kacerguis & Adams, 1980). Further, according to Erickson's theory, a woman's identity cannot be fully resolved until she has children; therefore, we can assume, at least with women, intimacy and identity are interdependent (Kroger, 1997). Kacerguis and Adams (1980) found that the achievement of identity is correlated with, though not a prerequisite of, the capacity for intimacy regardless of gender in adolescents and young adults; yet the idea that relationships are more central to

women's identities persists. Erikson's theory and related arguments on dependencies and timing can be cross referenced with similar ideas such as the tension between attachment and individuation (Franz & White, 1985), differentiation and individuation (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1990; Gavazzi & Sabatelli, 1990), attachment and identity (see Årseth et al., 2009), or differentiation and attachment (Willis & Cashwell, 2017). Given our social construct's (patriarchal, capitalistic) historical oppression of women and those with non-normative gender roles and identity, the ability to develop and tolerate the anxiety of intimacy is significantly hampered when there is identity insecurity.

One specific therapeutic model that seeks to help with intimacy through helping couples develop a secure bond is Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT; Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). However, in my work using EFT, I became concerned that without also recognizing and addressing matters of oppression and identity the EFT process may intensify related underlying systemic issues and lead to increased dependency, vulnerability, and disempowerment. Once I began to recognize this pattern with my couples, I also started to wonder if EFT's negative interactional pattern of pursuit/withdrawal, already considered a gendered response (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001), is actually a consequence of the female socialization of focusing on other versus the self. Further, and perhaps more disturbing, is the potential that EFT's recommendation for how to break this cycle—encouraging the pursuer (typically the woman) to show vulnerability instead of criticism—could further disempower women and reinforce oppressive gender norms (Johnson, 2012).

As a middle-aged adult and a relational therapist, I have personally experienced, and witnessed time and again in women seeking individual and relational therapy, the effects of oppressive gender norms on identity and relationships. Faced with these observations in my work

using a clinical theory that I believed in (i.e., EFT), and facing my own failure to thrive using an EFT framework in my own marriage, I started to consider who is best situated to be attuned to, responsive to, available for, and engaged with one's fundamental wants and needs. Who is best suited to care for and understand us? Who is the only person who we can develop a secure attachment with who will never abandon us? The answer seemed clear: oneself.

Statement of Purpose

Using feminist, evocative, autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and arts-based research from a feminist lens, this dissertation investigates the experience of facilitating my development of a secure attachment to myself, a voluntarily childfree middle-aged woman, in order to uncover related effects on identity and relationships. Clinically, my hope is that this personally transformational work will ensure that my clinical work helps to facilitate empowerment and security. By sharing the intimate details of a process to overcome these issues through the research, I hope to inspire others to explore new ways of being in the world that lead to increased empowerment and relational functioning. Ultimately, the findings of this study can help others navigate issues of identity, attachment, oppression, and associated intra-and inter-personal conflict.

Research Questions

In order to explore how the process of developing a secure attachment to the self influences identity and intimate relationships, the following research questions are posed:

1. How has the internalization of privilege and socially and culturally mandated rules influenced my spiritual, sexual, relational, cultural, and physical identities and actions towards myself and others?
2. What are the implications of:

- a. No longer applying oppressive norms and expectations to myself and others, and
 - b. Engaging with myself and others from a more cohesive and inclusive identity?
3. As a childfree woman whose body was not used to bring children into the world, and who no longer meets the ideal of attractiveness (young, taut, unblemished, etc.), what are the identity implications of the middle-aged body? Specifically, after a lifetime of being seen as an object, who am I, and what is my purpose?

Action agenda

The purpose of the current study is to improve society by presenting a perspective outside of the dominant discourse. This perspective is developed by exploring concealed internalized hierarchies that have served to dominate and oppress my identity and, subsequently, my treatment of others (Creswell, 2013). Aligned with feminist theory, in this study worked to develop a non-exploitative and collaborative relationship with myself; to defy traditional research and patriarchal norms by placing myself as the subject, not the object, of my study (see Harding, 1987); and to ensure that my research is transformative to my own life, with the intention of helping others with their own transformations (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, the present study applies a feminist lens to research to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71).

My personal goal in this study was to intimately explore the emotional and interrelational effects of concentrated self-focus and prioritization (e.g., acting and thinking counter to the rules and norms of the dominant culture). Through this process confronted my self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Greenleaf, 2005; Moradi & Yu-Ping, 2008) and socialization as a

woman in a society that expects a woman's identity to be based on self-sacrifice and caring for others.

Chapter One — Study Design

This is an arts-based, feminist evocative autoethnographic study. It is a creative, subjective account of acting in a countercultural way to further personal and relational transformation, and then to translate findings into data and outcomes that will contribute to couple and family therapy and other related fields. Taking active steps to focus on and prioritize my physical, emotional, and sexual wants and needs in my daily life throughout the research provided an opportunity to conduct an arts-based estrangement autoethnography using creative and self-reflective processes to critically evaluate internal and interpersonal reactions to countercultural actions (Keenan & Evans, 2014, as cited in Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Although the design of the study is fluid, the primary data source is the researcher. Aligned with Stewart's (1994) feminist critiques and methodology procedural perspective, I explore the impact of my role and position in society using systemic exploration and conscious intent. Aligned with Bochner and Ellis (2016), I present findings in the format of a story that invites the reader into the experience and creates a connection between reader and writer:

...evocative autoethnographers focus attention on people. We want to connect with our readers. Unimpressed by jargon, we prefer to talk the way most human beings talk.

Communication is the pleasure and burden of our work. Since we live in much the same world as our readers, we believe a reader should not have to struggle endlessly to understand and relate to us. Our challenge is to artfully arrange life in ways that enable readers to enter into dialogue with our lives as well as with their understanding of their own. (p. 79)

Presenting findings in this fashion makes the research more accessible and actionable (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Bochner & Ellis, 2016) to a broader audience while maintaining my integrity as a person and a researcher. Highlighting the midlife results of my internalized struggle with identity, social devaluation, and powerlessness, I take conscious steps to shift my perspective and actions accordingly and explore internal and external reactions to these shifts. Specifically, I use creative and analytical means grounded in feminist theory to identify how I have been socialized to conceptualize and enact my identity in my day-to-day life and relationships. Additionally, I explore how I make conscious shifts to uncover and address related injustices I have inflicted upon myself and others (Lather, 1991). Research tools include art in the form of song, poetry, visual art, and a reflexive “journal” made up of transcriptions of conversations with myself. Using these tools, I confront the centrality of socially created paradigms on identity development and relational functioning (Creswell, 2013) by documenting hidden identities, insights, and the effects of these findings on relationships to self and other. Themes and processes are collected and analyzed, and ways to integrate findings into life and work to further the MFT field are discovered and documented; outcomes include theory and clinical interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory (FST; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Harding, 1987) was developed to politically address the use of colonization and inequality of traditional research and the scientific issues of researcher bias distorting or misrepresenting their voices and experience leading to further disempowerment (Harding, 2012). The central claim of FST is that there is no objectivity in the creation of knowledge because the social positions of people that create

knowledge are central to its creation; thus, knowledge is no more than a standpoint (Collins, 1997/2004; Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020; Harding, 1987). This to me is the mirror version of hermeneutic philosophy, specifically in the idea that understanding, such as an understanding of culture, cannot be separated from the interpreter (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Hughes (2002) argued that FST was both theoretical and practical in that it positions itself in the everyday and thus allows us to critique and assess traditional research methodology and the dominant structure it typically serves. Many theorists define FST as less a perspective than an *achievement because* a standpoint cannot exist without struggle against oppressors and reflexive, critical consciousness (Hughes, 2002; Solomon, 2009). Given this, since FST's creation it has gone through extensive review, refinement, and critique. Hekman (1997/2004) contended that FST went out of fashion, especially with younger feminists, because due to its Marxist roots, it seems to contradict postmodern and poststructural thought. Collins (1997/2004) dismisses Hekman's (1997) lengthy analysis and critique of FST as completely off point, contending that focusing on truth and methodology depoliticized the intention and roots of FST (i.e., actively exposing and combating oppression). Instead, Collins (1997/2004) asserts, as an interpretive framework, FST is devoted to elucidating the connection between the production of knowledge and unjust power systems.

The revised interpretation of FST ontology is one of relationship (e.g., social, political, sexual relations) and ongoing process (Jaggar, 2004, p. 59). FST confronts the seemingly universal acceptance of the male perspective with the unique and thus privileged standpoints of the oppressed (Harding, 1987; Jaggar, 2004; Ruddick, 2004). According to Brooks (2007), central principles of FST place the concrete experiences of women at the center of research to meet several intentions, to:

1. share the authentic experience and associated knowledge gained from women's perspectives in a variety of disciplines that have historically excluded women,
2. use that knowledge to examine and critique society from those perspectives,
3. assess if these perspectives provide new insight into our world, and
4. use found knowledge to unite and inspire action.

FST scholars believe exploring actual life experiences is critical to righting the wrong of our patriarchal society's creation and sharing of knowledge purely from the male perspective; thus falsifying, misrepresenting, or excluding the experiences of women (Brooks, 2007). Harding (2012) suggests that for nearly 30 years, FST has helped to embrace and use the subjective nature of the researcher to prevent colonization of knowledge, by collecting evidence and shedding light on a wide variety of interesting and problematic hypotheses, conceptual frameworks and contextual understandings of society and nature. Further, Harding (2012) suggested that the process of FST results in a focus on disadvantaged populations rather than dominant groups and can result in greater dissemination of findings that lead to increased empowerment for the oppressed.

Queer Theory

While my main epistemological frame is feminist standpoint, I also integrate aspects of queer theory to challenge the idea that identity is fixed and can be judged as normal or abnormal (Watson, 2005). Further, I deconstruct my sexual identity to understand how being seen and identified as an object of desire, and the effect of no longer being seen as such, has enabled and constrained my identity, actions, and relationships (Watson, 2005). From the perspective of intersectionality, working towards exploring and accepting my nonbinary queer gender identity

adds another layer of complexity, thus allowing for a broader exploration of how mid-life identity is formed and maintained.

Queer theory, developed in the mid 1990s, has been summarized as a combination of methods that explore identity in relation to desire and is based on the exploration of how sexual identifiers became understood as stable identities whose weak constructs are dependent upon navigating gender expectations (Watson, 2005). Further, it is defined as a theory that deconstructs the situational idea of a unified *self* in an effort to explore the intersection of oppression, identity, and dynamics within our social construct (Watson, 2005).

Teresa de Lauretis popularized the term *queer theory* as terminology to describe gender hierarchies without situating the debate around the male experience of homosexuality (Watson, 2005; Das, 2020). Although queer theory is indeed *not* an organized theory, it aims to both disrupt the homo-heterosexual binary and “radically question and destabilize all forms of identity that are considered to be the norm” (Das, 2020, p. 98). Further, destabilizing aims of queer theory are to disrupt and dismantle “gendered and sexualized identity which, as central, organizing principles of society, social relations, and social institutions, function to preserve a hegemonic order” (Anderson, 2007, as cited in Das, 2020, p. 98). Using a queer lens will provide an opportunity to explore “the strange regulatory manner in which normalised [*sic*] identities regulated themselves” (Childers, 2003, p. 39). These ideas both excite and terrify me for a variety of reasons that will become apparent throughout this paper. I note my fear to highlight my discomfort and hence personally create a mandate to explore and integrate this theory into my work.

Significance of the Study

There is a gap in the literature around the experience of being childfree. Aligned with feminist standpoint theory, this study will disrupt traditional research by focusing on personal experience, emotion, and vulnerability thus ensuring outcomes will be applicable and accessible to people both in and out of the field (Adams et al., 2015). In addition, research to date on childfreeness has almost exclusively focused on heterosexual women (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Lynch et. al., 2018). Given this, it is also critical to consider this issue from an intersectional lens. As I have lived my life as a woman, but self-identity outside of gender norms (identifying as neither a female or a male) and sexual identity norms (bisexual or pansexual), I have a unique view of how using gender as an organizing principle has shaped my life and consciousness (Creswell, 2013).

Living up to the expectations of FST, focusing on myself is a significant political act for several reasons. First, Blackstone and Stewart's (2012) exhaustive review on research related to childfreeness identified gaps in the literature around childfreeness in midlife. Second, research with a midlife woman as the subject, not the object of the study is also rare in the marriage and family therapy literature (Krekula, 2007). Third, Mullins (2018) noted "pronatalist ideologies [are] deeply rooted within American culture" (p. 98) and suggested Hays' (1996) assertion that mothers are expected to prioritize their children above all else was still highly relevant today; given that also in the United States' pronatalist society, womanhood *is* motherhood (Graham et al., 2018; Mullins, 2018), prioritizing myself as research subject is countercultural. Specifically, being emotionally and actionably self-focused *and* childfree further challenges the objectification and social construction of a woman's role in society. In summary, using creative and critical self-evaluation processes to explore the subjective experience of a midlife, childless woman,

within a culture that considers women in midlife to be invisible/irrelevant (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005, as quoted by Powell, 2013; Krekula, 2007), is an act of political defiance that will also fill distinct gaps in the literature gaps and potentially empower other women and marginalized populations.

Chapter Two — Literature Review

The current literature review explores research related to voluntary childfreeness, women's development and identity, and attachment. The goal of this research is both political and personal; therefore, these three broad areas, with special attention to feminist issues, will help ground this study's process and findings and justify my study design. Voluntary childfreeness literature is included to document the history of this choice as it relates to the cultural context of the present study. More specifically, this includes particular challenges to identity faced by women in general. Additionally, attachment and EFT are explored from a feminist lens to critique these oft used theories.

These three areas help to ground my personal experience to date regarding my decisions to not have children. They academically ground the barriers I have faced towards establishing a cohesive and empowered identity. Integration of attachment and EFT helps inform my recent conceptualization of challenges I have faced personally and, regarding the use of EFT, as a couples therapist. These challenges have contributed to my decision to confront suppressed identities and develop a more secure attachment to myself.

Childfreeness and Feminism

Since Veevers (1973) identified childfreeness as being nearly completely ignored by family researchers, there has been a significant increase in attention to the topic. Starting in the 1980s, research on childfreeness has dramatically increased. One reason for this increase in

attention is the significant global increase in childfreeness, especially voluntary childfreeness (Kreyenfeld & Kanetzka, 2017; Sappleton, 2018).

Feminism, with its focus on feminine subjugation, heteronormativity, and womanhood as a singular experience within the patriarchal structure, raised the radical idea that parenthood was a choice, and thus gets much of the blame from pronatalists for the increasing number of women without children (Sappleton, 2018). Yet in the blanket assumption that women are naturally caregivers focused on relationships, feminist theorists contribute to the overarching patriarchal order. Gillespie (2000) noted that feminism has historically focused on reproductive rights and choice, yet “many second wave and contemporary feminists, whilst critical of the conditions within which women mother, have themselves failed to challenge the idea of a fixed, innate, or inherent imperative in women for motherhood” (p. 232). There is a failure to challenge, or even notice, an issue with defining women by caregiving and relationships.

Voluntary Childfreeness

Shapiro (2014) conducted a review of the voluntarily childfree literature and noted that for 30 years, research has focused on motivation, characteristics, risks, stigma, and effects on health and wellbeing; yet there are still many literary gaps related to this understudied population, and the debates underlying the studies that do exist are suspect as they lack diverse samples and are done from a pronatalist lens. Blackstone and Stuart (2012) also compiled extant literature on voluntary childfreeness and found that most studies focused on the how and why of making the decision to be childfree from both a macro- and micro- process level, and cultural perceptions related to managing the stigma and label of being deviant within the child-bearing years. For instance, studies have focused on voluntarily childfree women and careers. Abma and Martinez (2006) used data from 4 cycles of the United States National Survey of Family Growth

(1982, 1988, 1995, & 2002) for women 35 – 44 to compare income, career, and religiosity in women who are childfree versus those who have children. Findings suggest that, in general, income and career satisfaction were higher and religiosity was lower for women who are childfree compared to women with at least one child.

The phenomenon of being childfree in late life has also been researched. Blackstone and Stuart (2012) explored literature on being childfree in elderly populations and found most studies focused on exploring the later-in-life effects of being childfree on emotional and physical wellbeing, quality of life, and support systems later in life. It is important to note that despite research that problematizes voluntary childfreeness, seeking to show it as emotionally and physically harmful to women (e.g., the idea that women without children feel empty and damaged and have a lower quality of life; Shapiro, 2014), the bulk of the studies reviewed by Blackstone and Stuart (2012) showed little to no adverse effect. In relation to the belief that children are necessary to ensure support later in life, Blackstone and Stuart (2012) also noted that connection with community and others was a viable alternative to parenting in later-in-life child-free individuals.

Shapiro (2014) noted that pronatalist research that problematizes voluntary childfreeness does so as a method of social control in order to maintain sovereignty over women's bodies, and this becomes clear when reviewing the research. For instance, extensive research shows that an overriding stigma about women who are voluntarily childfree is that they are selfish, self-centered (Carey et al., 2009; Park 2005; Reuter, 2019; Shapiro, 2014; Rich et. al, 2011; Veevers, 1973), materialistic (Rich et. al., 2011), and deviant (Graham et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2014). Further, given the pronatalist assumption that womanhood equals motherhood, not having children is shown to have a variety of negative social consequences, such as “being met with

shock, pity, criticism and hostility” (Rich et al., 2011, p. 226) and is labeled as an overarching failure to achieve womanhood (Graham et al., 2018). Gandolfo (2005) notes that while some stereotypes of voluntary childfree women may seem positive, under these stereotypes is the implication that benefits come at a steep cost; for example, that the price of more freedom is the loss of access to true intimacy.

Voluntarily Childfreeness and Feminism

Despite the feminist tradition of seeking to expose social science’s silencing and failure to account for women’s experience (Davis & Gremmen, 1998), Gillespie (1999) noted that “despite the project of contemporary feminism being to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about women's lives and to validate difference, diversity and subjectivity in women, feminism has predominantly failed to accommodate the experiences of the voluntary childless” (p. 232). Specifically, despite the research that does exist on childfreeness, the academic literature has criticized feminist scholarship for minimizing or ignoring altogether the voices of childfree women (Chodorow, 1989; Letherby, 2002, as cited in O’Driscoll & Mercer, 2018). Lynch et al. (2018) conducted a 50-year literature review on voluntarily childfree women and found the research overwhelmingly quantitative and positivist. Further highlighted in this lapse in feminist attention, Lynch et al. (2018) found that within the qualitative research on the topic, which made up approximately one fifth of all research, only 9% of the studies based their research in feminist theory.

Lynch et al. (2018) also noted a distinct lack of research on social meaning and subjective experience and based on this silencing of the experience of voluntarily childfree women, called for more qualitative research exploring personal narratives using a feminist lens. Looking at the childfree literature from an intersectional lens, research has almost entirely focused on

heterosexual women (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). More recently, research on being childfree has expanded to men; however, the experiences of people outside of this gender binary have been largely ignored (Shapiro, 2014). Sappleton (2018) supports the call on research regarding voluntary childfreeness, noting that exploring and documenting the everyday, lived experience is essential for feminist research given its influence on social and personal identities. Similarly, intersectional feminist scholars are particularly interested in increasing a focus on the individual experience since the category “women” cannot provide an adequate understanding of the full spectrum of different experiences of life and oppression, especially as it relates to the childfree identity (Sappleton, 2018). For instance, McCall (2005) provides several examples of first-person intersectional narratives, noting the shift addresses the research methodology challenges inherent in the exploration of social identities by providing insight into a single dimension of multiple categories, and by doing so, embracing complexity and rejecting typically reductionist ideas.

Women’s Development and Identity

Women’s development and identity have historically been intertwined with objectification, motherhood, self-sacrifice, and caregiving (DeVault, 1994; Franz & White, 1985; Gillespie, 2000; Huffer, 1998; Krekula, 2007; Levesque, 2018; McCormick, 2008; Powell, 2013, Rich et.al., 2011; Shapiro, 2014). This construct of women being objects for others’ use has a variety of consequences within society, though the present study focuses specifically on women's identity and relationships. According to Franz and White (1985), “as a group women have, in their identity resolution, suffered from more obstacles than men; female development becomes more complicated when one considers society's expectations for the particular roles the female is to fulfill” (p. 236); specifically, wifehood and motherhood.

Caregiving and Identity

In relation to voluntary childfreeness, Hayfield et al. (2019) found that the decision to not have children required significant work on identity and revisiting of a seemingly rational decision to stay positive when negotiating intimate and platonic relationships; given our pronatalist society, this is not surprising. In addition, it is not enough to have a mandate to procreate; women are not only expected to have children, they are also expected to be focused intensively on them (Hays, 1996).

In addition to constructs on the imperative for women to care for others is the belief that, especially in women, wellbeing is dependent upon caring for and connecting to others (Keitel & Kopala, 2003), and it is clear that models for expanding the feminine identity outside of an object for other's use are rare. In fact, the desire to prioritize relationships and caring for others is often considered an inherent trait (Erikson, 1964; Franz & White, 1985). This stereotype continues despite studies and reviews that consistently show no difference between genders regarding the importance of relationships (Kroger, 1997). These limiting constructs around female identity can encourage and increase dependency on others and thus diminish empowerment and self-advocacy (Impett et al., 2006).

DeVault (1994) wrote in depth about how the caretaking expectations placed on women are both oppressive and implicitly create and maintain relationships that ensure women remain dependent and subservient. It is not enough to be subservient. Included in this construct is both the belittling of women's work and intellectual capacity. For instance, women's work is considered lower-level work focused on the concrete world while men's work is seen as intellectual and focused on the abstract world (Smith, 1987). Further, women are not only lower in intelligence than men, they are also conniving. The expectation that women care for and serve

their family includes the misogynistic stereotype of women being manipulative or controlling (Devault, 1994)—picture the stereotypical wife nagging her husband to get his chores done. In addition, norms around motherhood and the female identity also ensure mothering is devalued. For instance, Hallstein's (2006) work on "intensive mothering," based on Hays (1996) argument that "mothering continues to position all women in the subject position of the all-caring, self-sacrificing ideal 'Mother,' with limited constrained agency in the public, professional realm, and, importantly, is the *proper* ideology of contemporary for women across race and class lines" (p.97), shows how motherhood leads to more disempowerment and dependency.

Self-Objectification

Combining the pronatalist assumption with the patriarchal order, women are expected to be self-sacrificing caregivers (DeVault, 1994, Gillespie, 2000; Huffer, 1998; Krekula, 2007; Powell, 2013, Shapiro, 2014) who are also sex objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Levesque, 2018; McCormick, 2008). This socialized imperative of focus on others can impede the ability to self-actualize throughout the lifespan, especially as a woman's power and sense of self can be limited or totally dependent upon the external gaze.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) note that one of the most common and easily deniable ways that women are objectified is through sexual gazing (or depictions of sexual gazing in popular culture and advertising). This constant evaluation of women's bodies replaces their identity with the idea that they are merely a body that exists for other's use and pleasure. In fact, throughout our patriarchal culture, the male perspective is privileged above all others; thus, as is reinforced in film, women are depicted as passive objects to be used by others (Mulvey, 1989).

According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), women and girls are routinely sexually objectified, leading to women and girls seeing their value as simply how they

can be used by others. When this happens, one's identity becomes dependent upon and representative of the external view (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Thus, sexual objectification becomes internalized, leading to self-objectification (continuous monitoring of external appearance, body shame, and anxiety) and a variety of psychological disorders such as depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; see Moradi & Yu-Ping, 2008). From a power perspective, to see how this becomes a double bind, we need go no further than to analyze rape myths (e.g., dressing provocatively makes a woman irresistible) and rape ideation (e.g., she is obviously asking for it; Blyth, 2010; Crall & Goodfriend, 2016).

O'Neil and Egan (1992) posit that stereotypical gender norms are upheld as ideal through societal reinforcement (e.g., commercial products, media, etc.), and most adults, even throughout later adulthood, strive to live up to gender stereotypes. By seeking to conform to societal norms regarding what it means to be a woman, countercultural identities can become hidden or suppressed, or they can disrupt one's ability to develop identity (O'Neil & Egan, 1992). Butler (2004) goes further to say that "a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" (p. 1). Alternatively, Riggs and Turne (1997, citing Giddens, 1992) noted that the act of separating reproduction from sexuality provides the opportunity to consider one's identity separate from sexual activity. The idea of separating reproduction from identity seems central to the debate between pronatalism and an integrated and self-defined identity.

Midlife Identity

Once past the typical child-bearing years, middle-aged women gradually become either the butt of jokes (e.g., crone, witch, hag; Wainrib, 1992) or irrelevant and all but invisible in

society (Gilleard & Higgs 2005, as quoted by Powell, 2013; Krekula, 2007; O'Neil & Egan, 1992; Wainrib, 1992). Further, Riggs and Turne (1997) note that when aging, society's focus on perfect bodies threatens one's identity, posing a considerable challenge for "sustaining a continuous, recognizable uniform self because the phenomenological necessity of a continuous self is threatened and undermined by this very discontinuity of the body" (p. 230). With her attractiveness and fertility no longer a defining quality, using a family life cycle lens, women's identities become tied to children leaving home (i.e., empty nesting) and are associated with confusion around purpose (Wainrib, 1992).

Family Life Cycle and Developmental Frameworks

Pronatalist cultures like the United States interpret being childfree as a threat to the typical traditional family (Park, 2005), and consider parenting and grand-parenting a critical developmental task (Brubaker, 1986; Erikson, 1964, 1980; Keitel & Kopala, 2003; Levinson, 1986), a social responsibility (Franz & White, 1985), and a moral imperative (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). Berge et al. (2011) identified Carter and McGoldrick's (1989) family life cycle framework as the most commonly referenced when looking at family life. In their research on how transitions in the family life cycle affect the onset of eating disorders, Berge et al. (2011) noted that the purpose of the developmental stages of the family life cycle is to define the individuals within the system. Given this, how does one conceptualize a childfree woman's identity when four of the six stages of Carter and McGoldrick's (1989) Family Life Cycle framework revolve around children? McGoldrick et al. (2016) edited an expanded volume of family life cycle articles to include modern interpretations of family; yet this volume *still* assumes that family equals children, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. In addition, Erikson (see Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, 1964) not only assumes that motherhood is a

developmental task, but also “implies that motherhood is an indispensable element in women's identity struggle” (Franz & White, 1985, p. 232); this is a common facet of developmental models. Specifically, once one veers off the defined pronatal path by not procreating, societal expectations of life cycles and experiences no longer align with the prescribed life tasks and goals.

Developmental models that exclusively focus on the life cycles of traditional families with children continue to be used in modern psychology. According to Keitel and Kopala (2003), these models were also used by feminist psychologists such as Gilligan (1982, 1991) and Jordan et al. (1991). Therefore, developmental theories aligned with adult life stages (i.e., early, middle, and late adulthood) inevitably revolve around issues of motherhood, and this influences training and the provision of mental health services. For instance, according to Capuzzi and Stauffer (2016) “pregnancy and postpartum issues are significant issues for women in early adulthood” (p. 391); they go on to indicate that after pregnancy there is the issue of weight gain, which can seriously affect self-image. This presumption of motherhood, followed by normalizing of body shaming, is a prime example of how oppressive norms are reinforced in modern psychological constructs.

Attachment, EFT, and Feminism

As mentioned above, there is a strong link between identity and attachment, especially when it comes to dealing with disruptions to identity (Pittmann et al., 2011). While the process of developing an attachment is “sometimes assumed to represent a predominantly female orientation or concern” (Franz & White, 1985, p. 225), as bonding creatures, all humans, including adults, rely on others for security (Bowlby, 1982; Feeney, 2007; Johnson, 2008). Specifically, having a secure home base, which is defined as a relational connection that enables

one to confidently explore one's environment (Bowlby, 1982), is thought to be critical for effective functioning and mental health (Feeney, 2004). The concept of the secure base also applies to attachment in adult relationships (see Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Thrush, 2010). Johnson (2008) suggests accessibility, responsiveness, and emotional engagement are necessary to develop a secure attachment and healthy relationships, and accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement are all considered feminine traits (Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002).

From a feminist perspective, if a secure attachment is an essential prerequisite for health and wellbeing, does that not keep women right where they belong? Birns (1999) made exactly that assumption when she noted, without irony, in a feminist critique of attachment that feminists gravitate towards attachment because of its focus on the "biologically determined relationship between mother and child" (p. 11)—one of women's major roles. Birns (1999) further noted that the key feminist issues related to attachment are the potential for women to feel inadequate as mothers if they do not attach to their children, and other contextual issues are not taken into consideration as mothers are solely blamed for all future mental health (Birns, 1999).

Franzblau (1999) was more circumspect when she noted that feminists need to be more careful and critical regarding the scientific arguments regarding caretaking and women and the associated notion that women are responsible and to blame for the social problems of women and children. Depending upon social class issues and one's freedom related to the motherhood imperative, the capacity to devote time and attention to oneself seems unlikely given how traditional expectations of women divert women's attention from themselves to other.

Emotionally Focused Therapy

EFT is an integrative model combining experiential therapy and a central concept of systems theory regarding negative interactional patterns causing conflict versus individual

pathology (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). EFT conceptualizes needs and emotional responses as normal and adaptive, but it becomes problematic when emotional responses reinforce or reenact attachment wounds (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). The nine-step manualized EFT process seeks to address attachment wounds and increase intimacy by facilitating the development of a secure bond between partners by helping them be accessible, responsive, and emotionally engaged (Johnson, 2008, 2012) with one another.

According to Vatcher and Bogo (2001), who sought to integrate more feminist constructs into EFT, the theory is already fundamentally a feminist model for several reasons, including that it “assumes women’s traditional ways of relating are healthy and normative” (p. 70), and it can help “challenge and expand traditional, restricted, and polarized gendered behaviors and heal some of the damage inherent in traditional gender socialization” (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001, p. 71). On the one hand, these ideas support relational therapist’s criticism of theories that support the more stereotypically male constructs of autonomy, differentiation, and individuation (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001); alternately, it also reinforces the polarization of attributes into the feminine/masculine construct and reinforces the belief that women are inherently more interested in relationships.

Vatcher and Bogo (2001) sought to integrate feminist principles into a more integrative EFT approach by naming gendered issues within relationships and applying EFT techniques from the perspective of traditional gendered norms (such as explaining how emotional reactions and defenses are seen as gendered). Unfortunately, aside from the traditional exploration of disowned aspects of the self, such as feelings of vulnerability, this new conceptualization does not address, and may reinforce, issues of identity and dependency central to the limits of EFT.

Literature Review Summary

In summary, the theory of attachment was conceptualized and has deep ties to patriarchal themes of women's identity and responsibility being synonymous with motherhood and caretaking. Traditional *and* feminist psychology has reinforced this bias and continues to miss the point related to empowering women to embrace identities separate from relationship and caring for others. My hypothesis stands that in order to address these issues, developing a secure attachment to the self is essential for secure identity and empowered intimacy. Goldman and Greenberg (2013) have a similar hypothesis as they argue that while adult relationships in general seek attachment through proximity, availability, and responsiveness in their partners, this is not interchangeable with a young child's drive for the same from their caregiver. Goldman and Greenberg (2008, 2013) believe adults also need to be seen and accepted as individuals with their own identity; thus attachment and identity are both required for healthy relationships and must be seen and attended to as two independent variables. Goldman and Greenberg (2008) also noted that confidence in identity is dependent upon affirmation from others, and later, Goldman and Greenberg (2013) argued that when one's identity is threatened through issues of hierarchy, control, and dominance, it brings about anger, shame, and fear, and that these effects can be addressed using self-soothing. While this balances out the EFT conceptualization of relationships related to attachment, it does not address the effect of the systemic oppression of the feminine identity on self and relationships that I explore in this study. Specifically, I consider whether the idea of personal responsibility and empowerment in relation to attachment-to-self may help address some of the woman-blaming inherent in the attachment debates and perhaps make up for contextual issues as well.

Chapter Three — Methodology

Methods

Harnois (2013) notes that there is no one central methodology, approach, or unified theory of feminist research, though there are philosophical perspectives that describe unifying characteristics including a feminist perspective, a shift in approach (*how* the research is conducted), and what is ultimately done with the research. Similarly, Intemann (2012) noted that feminist scholars have identified and agreed upon key principles within feminist research to minimize biases including ensuring the research confronts and centralizes issues of oppression and critically identifies and evaluates traditional assumptions, theories, and models. Griffiths (1995) identified the commonalities within feminist epistemology, including a focus on process, power, values (rather than facts), theory, positionality, and context. Brooks (2007) notes that the approach to research, then, uses innovative methods to highlight experiences.

Given the history and intentions of feminist research, and my interest in experiential learning, improvisation, and creativity, this study combines feminist (evocative) autoethnography (FA) and arts-based research (ABR) to critically evaluate my experience in and reactions from society when behaving in a countercultural way. These two closely aligned methodologies will result in outcomes that provide a novel perspective on identity, lived experience, and oppressed narratives and be both actionable and accessible to a wide range of stakeholders in academic, therapeutic, and layperson communities.

Evocative Autoethnography

I am highlighting evocative autoethnography here because I see the process and output of my research as intimately entwined. Bochner and Ellis (2016) provide a summary of Billig's

(2013) treatise on writing in the social sciences that sums up my experience with academic writing and hence what I seek to avoid repeating:

...if you want to succeed in the social sciences, you have to learn to write badly and to make the topics about what you are writing difficult to grasp. You learn to cloak ideas in jargon, using long and obscure words... you think you need to sound smart in order to gain respect, so you stop speaking like an ordinary person and start talking like an academic, that is, in the “academic dialect”. Not many people have mastered the academic jargon you use, but no need to worry. You sound as if you know what you’re talking about. Besides, the reader’s insecurities will assure that you’ll be respected. Like a bully, the obscure writer humiliates the reader into submission by centering the action on theoretical ‘things’ rather than on actual people who, of course, would never talk in an academic dialect unless they were seeking to be admired as academics. (p. 79)

This academic dialect is fundamentally a social justice issue, and in some cases, it not only reinforces or contributes to oppression, it also shows the researcher’s hypocrisy, which is an issue of integrity. Specifically, I have been struggling with the jargon-laden critique of the patriarchy using the same voice and technique of the oppressor. I have found this contradiction especially prevalent in feminist research books written about the fight against oppressive positivist research using “the father tongue” (patronizing, objective, distancing language) vs. “the mother tongue” which according to Bochner and Ellis (2016) “exposes rather than protects the speaker through a medium that can bring author and reader together” (p. 82). Similar to the self-work I do to prepare for my clinical work, through deep exploration of things that scare and expose me (for instance my own hypocrisy), I provide approachable observations that evoke an emotional response with the intention of helping others do the same.

Feminist Autoethnography

Autoethnography and FST are both focused on deeply exploring experience and are therefore perfectly aligned. McNamara (2009) noted that for thousands of years, culture, in the form of storytelling, folklore, and ritual, has been preserved and held by women, but the meaning and interpretation of that culture has been reserved for men. Despite feminist efforts, women's experience and wisdom has been distorted, dismissed, or silenced from the cultural and scientific dialogue, even in relation to qualitative research methods (Harding, 1991). Given this, autoethnography may be the best research method for righting this wrong (McNamara, 2009), though accessing this oppressed wisdom requires a variety of creative methods. Adams et al. (2015) describe autoethnography as reconciling disconnects between creative and analytic thought, "insider and outsider perspectives and between social practice and social constraint" (p. 3) to make sense of our experiences in relation to culture. Gannon (2016) suggested autoethnography captures the experience of the subject and object of research through feelings, thoughts, and the body. Adams et al. (2015) noted that autoethnography is an essential method in the social sciences, because attempting to apply hard science to human thoughts, actions, and meaning is moot as the landscape is uncertain and fraught with emotions. Besides, there is no single "truth" to be found. Further, they noted that embracing social research requires "a research method that, to the best of its/our ability, acknowledges and accommodates mess and chaos, uncertainty and emotion" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 10), and autoethnography fits the bill.

FA as a methodology embraces subjectivity—exploring being, doing, and knowing—to create research that exposes oppression while also taking action against it (Allen & Piercy, 2005). Allen and Piercy (2005) position the sharing of this knowledge within feminism in general, and FST in particular, by noting that it allows for the broadcasting of the historically

denied, devalued, dismissed, and silenced female voice. Ettorre (2017) contends that FA illustrates the idea that the personal is political through the exploration of embodied emotion and knowledge—exposing oppression, raising consciousness, and working towards positive change for women.

Allen and Piercy (2005) described FA as a process of discovering deep knowledge and connection by alternating between the external world of culture, society, and history and the internal world of vulnerable experience. The idea of meeting and embracing vulnerability is used consistently in FA accounts. Stern (2015) wrote that the process of FA is transformational in that it allows one to move from an oppressed identity to a feminist identity of power and strength. Through the process of free writing, Allen, of Allen and Piercy (2005), suggests she is able to get closest to her vulnerable self, and it is from the place of vulnerability that she finds the strength to be more open and accepting, not only to her experience, but to the experience of others. Specifically, she notes it helps her to strip away her tendency to distance herself from people through theory, especially with those who are in marginalized positions so she is better able to listen, engage, and connect. This feels especially important to me in this research, and with my related clinical work, given my own tendency to become analytical to distance myself when I am uncomfortable. Finally, Hughes and Pennington (2017) noted that social researchers using autoethnography must be critically reflexive in accepting their own roles in creating the problems they are researching; “it is the crucial consideration of unveiling the vulnerable self that can free the mind of self-deception without self-deprecation” (p. 23).

Aligned with Stewart’s (1994), feminist critiques and methodology procedural perspective, I explore the impact of my role and position in society using systemic exploration and conscious intent. Highlighting the midlife results of my internalized struggle with identity,

relationship, and social devaluation, I take conscious steps to shift my perspective and actions from an oppressed perspective to one of empowered independence. Allen and Piercy (2005), as cited in Krieger (1991) noted that “Feminist autoethnography is being achingly honest with oneself in the service of finding a deeper understanding of self and society” (p. 160), and this methodological approach is apropos of the subjects I seek to explore.

Estrangement Autoethnography

I have a strong belief that hidden identities, or “parts,” and “deeper truths” require a variety of methods to be coaxed out into the light. Using autoethnography and ABR methods help uncover some of these oppressed voices, but these processes did not feel relational enough for me. Hughes and Pennington (2017) described estrangement autoethnography as intentionally acting and thinking in ways that are contrary to dominant cultural rules and norms to reveal hidden knowledge. Keenan and Evans (2014) describe estrangement autoethnography as socially engineered research whereby the researcher deliberately acts in ways that defy the particular social norms of the environment. By doing so, the researcher is able to witness and engage in interactions from an *estranged state* and thus gain insight into the self as well as the environment (Keenan & Evans, 2014).

Aligned with estrangement autoethnography, one way I invite hidden knowledge into my consciousness is by acting in a countercultural way, specifically, becoming self-focused, through prioritizing my wants and needs above others, and seeing what comes up. As a person living my life as a woman, and given my family of origin trauma, relationship has always been the center of my worldview. Two key events took place that shattered my seemingly unshakable focus on relationship. The first was a letter exchange I set up between me and my “inner child” in June of 2018. I wrote a letter to my young self, and then a few days later, put myself into the mind state

of my child self, and wrote back. In this letter, my young self demanded that I stop complaining about never being seen or prioritized and start seeing myself. This letter was like a lightning bolt! I was so excited about my discovery that I ran right out and started helping others grapple with this issue (see what I did there? Upon getting and agreeing to instructions to focus on myself, I managed to redirect my focus to others). When, during the process of writing this manuscript, I faced the end of my second marriage, I was forced to confront the outcome of my tenacious focus on “other” (i.e., “husband”); specifically, how this focus contributed to projections in my relationship, a feeling of disempowerment and the systematic denial of my identity and lived reality. In summary, upon waking from my fantasy world, actively witnessing my thought processes and patterns of behavior exposed my illusion of control and false identity (e.g., an empowered, self-aware, relationship expert who prioritizes self-compassion and care).

Once awake from my fantasy of self-awareness, I started to witness how often I dismissed or silenced myself, versus thinking about how much I felt I was being dismissed and silenced by my partner. I started thinking that maybe some things I labeled as entitled white male narcissism in my partner were (also) possibly healthy ways of prioritizing oneself that I was socialized to reject. As is commonly experienced in clinical work, I started to see this pattern in many of my clients’ struggles as well. Fascinated, I started to research my hypothesis around the intra- and inter- personal consequences of women’s socialization as “other focused.”

Arts Based Research

To further explore hidden identities and truths through methods of creative and improvisational research, I help myself and aim to help others access a deeper truth by not only *thinking* but also *feeling* and *acting upon* what comes up from the experience. Chilton and Leavy (2014) note that science and ABR share similar goals and methods; they both rely on systematic

exploration with the intention of understanding life. The difference, they argue, is that ABR does not use other people to gain this knowledge, yet it can still be seen as objective if examined critically (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Chilton and Leavy (2014, citing Barone and Eisner, 2012; Finley, 2008; and Leavy, 2009) note that arts research is appealing to social researchers because art can “promote autonomy, raise awareness, activate the senses, express the complex feeling-based aspects of social life, illuminate the complexity and sometimes paradox of lived experience, jar us into seeing and thinking differently, and transform consciousness through evoking empathy and resonance” (p. 1).

“Women’s work” has been equated with base body knowledge that is seen as “less than” in our intellectualized world. The integration of ABR is another way to reclaim the wisdom and power of “feminine,” and hence oppressed, knowledge. When reflecting on ABR, Bickel (2005) noted “The disregard of valuable knowledge held within the senses, the body, and intuition is a tragic loss of ‘arational’ knowledge building and hence the disqualifying and ignoring of creative and alternative perspectives in the world” (p. 12).

Data Collection

Data collection took place through a variety of means within a nine-month period. I chose nine months based on what I imagined was a reliable timespan within which to collect data related to a countercultural experiment, as a nod to women who have grown another human inside of their bodies, and as a symbol of my own transformation. During data collection, I used artistic inquiry and critical reflexivity to find and free oppressed voices, inner knowledge, and suppressed or rejected desires and needs using past and future art works. Data was collected from engaging inter- and intra-personally from a more cohesive identity; that is, one where I explore and integrate my whole “self,” versus projection onto others or only accepting and embodying

the parts of myself that I feel are culturally/socially acceptable. I explored this more whole self by being consciously aware of my projections and working to not apply oppressive norms and expectations to self and others, and then documenting experiences through journaling, verbal self-inquiry, and art. I used these methods to both collect data and develop and test a new, more cohesive identity.

Although I experimented with different protocols for collection of data, eventually I accepted the overarching autoethnographic research recommendation for maintaining an open exploratory perspective that reflects back on itself through a loop of introspection and free-writing (Adams & Jones, 2008; Adams et al., 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016). There were some consistent processes used:

Overarching Study Protocol

1. Documentation of:
 - a. Date, time, and any other seemingly relevant contextual information (e.g., current mood? Recent fight? Sexual exploration? Work? Other?) as well as relevant info on past interactions as applicable
2. For free-writing, transcription of discussion with self, or artistic endeavor explore and document the following:
 - a. Ultimate process used and any discoveries that emerge
 - b. Any limiting beliefs that show up during processing of artistic endeavor, interpersonal exchange, or other activity
 - c. If and how process is reflective of:
 - i. Recent work with clients
 - ii. Recent or past events experienced

- iii. Musings on past, present, or future, identity
- iv. Recent hopes and fears in relation to own personal transformation
- d. Check in with body and document any feelings that come up before, during, and after activity
- e. Impulses based on experience (e.g., tell someone? Have a drink? Share with clients? Other?)
- f. Next steps or future projects that come to mind based on inquiry

Data Analysis

Early in my PhD program, I realized that the bulk of my life has been spent being a bridge between the creative and the analytical; thinking and feeling. Upon this discovery, I was able to make sense of previous decisions I made and the role I was playing in work, relationships, and my own journey. In my experience, being a bridge is a process of communicating between what are often polarities, finding or creating common themes, language, and, when necessary, “enemies” to unite seemingly disparate perspectives towards a common goal. The present study applied my many years of being a bridge to bring together my disparate parts for a more harmonious whole; a process aligned with hermeneutic philosophy. Many of the analytical research methods and processes I describe below are similar to Pitard’s (2016) Structured Vignette Analysis, a six-step process of reflection from various researcher perspectives (such as personal or academic reflexive voice) which ultimately provides many layers of awareness. These steps include processing through context, anecdote, emotional response, reflexivity, strategies developed, and ultimately conclusive comments on layers (Pitard, 2016).

The process of the current study cycles through emotion, creativity, and self-reflexive analytical processes. To help ground my experiment and provide insight into identity work leading up the launch of this study, in addition to the outcomes of the estrangement autoethnography, I use my research questions to identify, then analyze, relevant dissertation journal, poetry, artwork, and songs beginning eighteen months before study launch. The coding and analysis process was ongoing throughout the 9 months of data collection (as is common in autoethnography); seeking to uncover emotional and analytical themes as they emerged while integrating those findings into my activities.

Creative and Therapeutic Analysis Process

While analyzing past artistic work, I ground my work by letting my mind wander and then dance, sing, take a shamanic journey, or engage in whatever creative process feels appropriate to discovering meaning. Aligned with the process of building a secure attachment in EFT (Johnson, 2008), I then attune to myself, emotionally engage, and become responsive to whatever comes up by checking in with my body and documenting any feelings that come up before, during and after processing the activity. From there, I talk with myself or create another work that demonstrates my findings.

While processing past interactions aligned with my estrangement process, I follow a several step process of analysis:

1. Bring up interaction
 - a. Reflect on past rules and impulses to behave or interact in usual ways and listen to justifications and give appreciation for parts that sought to “help”
 - b. Bring “wise-self” to the front and review decision to see if and how decision/interaction was based on self love and ideal outcome

- c. Review how I can behave as best self, acting in a way that is most reflective of true self, wants and needs in the future
 - d. Take necessary time to listen to self (discuss in mirror), be compassionate to self and also look for behaviors hidden within expectation or upset with others
 - e. Release past anger/expectation of self/others and decide the best course of action to let go of lingering regret, shame, anger, etc.
 - f. Commit to trying again if possible, using more integrated self
2. Refine: edit past free write for clarity, keep both free write and edited version
 3. Add any other thoughts that come up within next few days after inquiry

Process of Analysis

Ultimately, my study combines a creative/therapeutic process with an analytical process aligned with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2008). From an analytical perspective, Smith and Osborn (2008) noted that IPA, aligned with hermeneutics, combines empathy with a questioning stance; this is a perfect example of bridging worlds. According to Smith and Osborn (2008), a participant's story reflects their identity; thus, with a focus on meaning, the researcher should analyze data to discover constructs or beliefs about the social and emotional world. Given this, in the first step of my analysis, aligned with IPA, I reviewed data with the intention of understanding my psychological state at the time of creating data. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) suggested the process of IPA is one of analytically exploring how meaning is made from life experiences to gather and interpret experiential themes. I therefore engaged with each data analytically and emotionally, bracketing and integrating personal reactions, reflecting, comparing and contrasting meanings and then ultimately I

processed my personal reactions, meaning hypotheses, and reflections on my experience using my “researcher mind.”

From a hermeneutic perspective, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) also note that the IPA process requires interpretation of what the participants are seeking to accomplish and what they may be saying unintentionally at the time of data collection. After collecting themes, I checked for patterns of larger themes. Once this was completed, I looked at the themes and subthemes and assembled the most relevant art works or related quotes to support them. This resulted in both concise themes and the most moving, relevant, or critical of the creative pieces to bring my final manuscript to life.

Member-checking and reflexivity (i.e., the process by which researchers position themselves in the research study by exposing their background and personal investment in the study and how it may inform their interpretation of data; Creswell, 2013) are extremely important elements of qualitative research because they increase and maintain trustworthiness. For the purposes of this study, as I am the researcher and the researched, reflexivity is baked into the process, and it is understood that the research is subjective. Additionally, I used triangulation throughout the course of the analysis to assist with strengthening validity. Triangulation is a technique used to increase trustworthiness by which “researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence...to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). In addition, I cross-referenced my findings with further literature to help with validity and reliability. This trustworthiness measure builds upon the reflexivity and bracketing techniques used during analysis to not only hold up the inherent values of qualitative research, but also to ensure findings truly reflect my lived experience.

Limitations

ABR, FST, and FA are limiting by design. Highlighting my standpoint, the current study is undertaken from my context, privileges, and perspective and therefore is limited by my biases and blind spots. As a white, established, educated, financially stable person, passing in society as a relatively attractive and financially successful therapist and heterosexual woman, my confidence and interpersonal skills may have minimized the societal reaction to my behavior compared to someone with less privilege. Living in a mostly progressive, predominantly white, New England village with minimal travel also limited my exposure to a wider variety of reactions and experiences. According to Hughes (2002), FST in particular, due to its focus on subjective experience, has been extensively critiqued along binaries of objectivity versus subjectivity or relativism versus positivism; though she goes on to say that ultimately, standpoint theory by design results in “a conceptual trinity of experience, reality and truth” (p. 173). Regardless, extensive arguments about the scientific merit of research on subjective experience, let alone first-person experience, are beyond the scope of this paper.

As a middle-aged woman who experienced significant childhood and sexual trauma, I have spent a lifetime building up masks, defenses, and identities to protect myself from the world and from my own consciousness. This work may therefore be limited by my own fears and lack of awareness of hidden identities. Using ABR is meant to help expose some hidden aspects of my identity, and ABR is by its nature, random, intuitive, and limited. In addition, analyzing past creative works of mine is limited by my current level of consciousness at any given time. Working on this manuscript, I was deep in the process of witnessing my everyday actions and reactions related to self-prioritization; this may limit the impact of my experience or my creativity due to preconceived notions.

Ethical Considerations

Autoethnography has the potential for common and unique ethical dilemmas, though even the common ones have their own autoethnography spin (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). For instance, the common ethical issue of confidentiality in research becomes even more complicated based on the author's clearly subjective interpretation of individuals in the work and the personal nature of the research. Anyone who knows the author can identify the characters. Hughes and Pennington (2017) also note that there is not enough research that provides acceptable guidelines on ethically writing autoethnography for publication or assessing the merit of manuscripts. Given these complications, autoethnographers place a lot of credence in "relational ethics" (Hughes & Pennington, 2017; Ellis, 2007), or ensuring that the researcher remains true to themselves and values while also being aware of and responsible for any impact on others individually and as a community (Ellis, 2007). This requires critical and ongoing consideration of potential ramifications to oneself, others, and relationships in regard to trust, reputation, and what is best for others while not sacrificing the integrity of one's own story; basically, a balancing of risk and reward on a case-by-case basis (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Given this research reflects on my past and current struggles in relationships, I have done a lot of reflecting and processing what feels essential to share related to my feelings about partners, friends, family, and others. Bochner and Ellis (2017) reflect on ways to think through these challenges by asking questions that I interpreted as "How would this person feel if they read what you wrote? How might they react? How would you feel about how they feel/react? Is the integrity of the story dependent upon sharing certain intimate details? Do you need to/is it feasible or possible to get consent from everyone in your story?" in addition to critically

exploring how exposure of vulnerable aspects of the self may impact your reputation and career.

Bochner and Ellis (2016) citing Ellis (2007) noted:

...when you're writing about family members or intimate others, you have to go to great lengths to take the role of the other, to interrogate your own role and motives, to imagine how other people respond and how you and they may feel later. You may want to ask yourself how they would tell the story and incorporate that into your version or use their story to enhance your own. Will you create a world-relationship-you later have trouble living in, or act in a way that you wish you had done differently? Are there other solutions or ways to say what you want to say to take care of yourself without hurting someone else? Can you write to understand how others in your life put their worlds together? Can you write yourself out of the trauma or figure out a way to be a survivor of the situation you've been handled that doesn't involve demonizing others? (p. 150)

Given the vulnerable nature of the research, I have processed these ethical issues through self-reflection and discussion with others who are mentioned in the manuscript.

In addition, I was to be very open with people I associate with regarding my intentions for this research, and for any sections where I share firsthand-information or conversations I have had, I have reviewed those sections with the person in question whenever possible. I also reviewed sensitive information about my experience related to people named (i.e., my mother, father, ex-husband, and current partner) to ensure accuracy and comfort with how they were portrayed. I did not need to obtain formal written consent from people in the story as I did not 1) directly share art or reflections made by the person, or 2) share identifiable information that could potentially harm them personally or professionally.

As for writing things about the past, I created composite characters, masked any identifiable contextual information, and used aliases or proper nouns instead of actual names. Regarding any vignettes or stories related to my work as a therapist, in addition to the above precautions, I avoided sharing any specific information discussed in therapeutic sessions that could in any way be identifiable. In sections where I reflect on my work with clients, I only share generalizable concepts or interactions that could apply to any therapeutic session in a composite form.

Chapter Four — Results

Owl says to me:
you must be what you be and take what you catch
you must witness the trail and find the right match
you can follow if you take what you get
you can see in the night with all of your wants
it's OK to hover and OK to land
it's OK to celebrate food in your hand
all of this vital comes with a price
you can't just have some or the parts that are nice
you can't pick and choose you take what you catch
you can't pick and choose it's all or it's not
taking the whole is the balance you seek
rodents and rabbits are not friends that you keep
when you're in your power the burden is great
not in your power a whole lot at stake
Owl doesn't lament the ones that escape
Owl doesn't sit in frustration we make
Owl we watch we weigh and we rest
we wait in the shadows, delight and assess
we find the right target and give it our all
sometimes we rocket and sometimes we fall
sometimes we miss, often in fact
we hunt, we fly, we take what we catch
we watch, we decide, we take what we catch

Owl- August 25, 2020

Introduction: None of This is The Truth

When I was nine months old, my mother kicked off her starring role as the villain of my childhood by choosing herself over the constraints of marriage, and then indirectly, over her children. To this day, my sister and I have never forgiven her. Alternatively, if my mother had the option to not take responsibility for us kids, my father, who has been heralded as the hero for “saving” my me and my sister at 11 and 13 years old (accepting us into his home with a new wife to care for us) may have been cast as the villain in my story and my mother the hero. We’ll never know. But my mother didn’t have options. It wasn’t a viable option in the late 60s/early 70s for her to consider, let alone find, a path outside of marriage and children; had independence been possible, it’s unclear if, like me, she would have chosen to be childfree. And once she had children (as was societally mandated) and decided to free herself from her marriage (which was, at the time, socially aberrant), foisting us kids onto my father wasn’t an option either. Regardless, my mother made these choices, and here I am, almost fifty years later, arguing the importance of women putting themselves first, despite knowing the painful consequences that my sister, my mother, and I suffered, and still suffer, for her doing just that.

I started this dissertation based on the hypothesis that if women had cohesive identities and chose to prioritize themselves above all else, the patriarchal system as we know it would crumble. To test this hypothesis I attempted, from a starting place of fearful-avoidant attachment, to build a secure attachment to myself by experiencing the world centered on my own experience, prioritizing my needs and wants above all others. Once I started ignoring societal rules and attempting to live according to my best interests, what I discovered surprised, terrified, and delighted me.

Although this work started in August of 2020 (when I finalized my proposal), from

September 1, 2020, to the day I am writing this, I shifted my behaviors to prioritize my body, spirit, and mental health in a variety of ways. First, I woke up early every morning and took my dog, Magick, on a hike, typically up a mountain I call “Panthera” in a state forest nearby. Sometimes we hiked several times a day, depending on how churned up I was. During our hikes, I let my mind wander; I attuned, listened, and talked to myself as if I was the most important person on Earth. I communed with, marveled at, and found meaning in the wildlife and trees I encountered. I also yelled at and celebrated Magick, the dog (see Appendix D) and the mystical concept. I recorded my thoughts and process; essentially, I spoke into my phone, which transcribed my conversations with myself.

During this timeframe I also prioritized my creativity and self-care. I wrote eight songs and improvised many others. I created two paintings, wrote dozens of poems, and took hundreds of photographs of what I encountered at Panthera (see Appendix C for links to photographs, songs, and lyrics). When not in the woods or creating, I did my best to otherwise prioritize myself, attune to my emotions, and assert my needs. I uncovered and explored my fractured identity, the lies I told myself, and the ways my socialization was impacting my thoughts, feelings, and decisions. I said no to things that did not serve me, I advocated for myself in ways I have never done before, and I worked on self-parenting, tuning into my various parts, and recorded associated video of self-therapy sessions (see Appendix C [movie](#)).

Within these nine months, I finalized a divorce and found an ideal mother, the forest, and a lover, a man I call M, and then processed the experience of relating to myself, and them, without—or at least while confronting—oppressive expectations and norms. I self-soothed and practiced being and living in trust and love with myself and the woods. I became my own mother, teacher, father, lover, and best friend. And during these times, as Magician and wise

Crone, I had transformative epiphanies and sexual breakthroughs; I experienced synchronicities that felt like impossible magick (the spiritual or occult spelling of magic). I cried and laughed and raged and sang and built up my body, identity, heart, and mind with the intention of engaging with integrity, and becoming stronger, more secure, more loving, more honest, and brave.

I also endured attachment insecurity that pushed me under water and held me there until I thought I would surely drown. When I wasn't in liminal space, I often felt like a tree in a winter storm: stripped raw, dead limbs breaking off, wind bending me until I thought I would surely break or be torn from the earth. From that exposed place I would dig my roots in deeper, barely holding on, but also feeling exhilarated, terrified, solid, knowing eventually Spring would come.

During the nine months of this experiment, I alternated between these identities: Tree and Magician/Crone—cycling through the transformative and terrifying again and again. Despite the moments of clarity, resolve, and wisdom I document, this dissertation is not about a pretty outcome: the transcendence, clarity, and empowerment, which appears and disappears as I process through my experiences. Rather, it is about the process of holding onto and losing myself in my attempts to be more cohesive and secure, and the dark, exciting, and treacherous moments in between.

To capture my experience, in addition to creative explorations, I kept two separate “journals” of my self-talk totaling 232 pages of transcribed conversations with myself; one I called “Woods Reflections,” and the other I called “Dating Notes for Dissertation” (distinguished by “—D”). In the former, my self-talk focused on my exploration of identity, self-attachment, and my love affair with the woods and my spirit animals. In the other, I shared my experiences engaging interpersonally from what I hoped was a more cohesive, or at least more self-aware, identity. In both, I documented the process of uncovering and exploring oppressed voices, hidden

knowledge, desires, and opportunities for self-love. Please note: the quotes I use are verbatim, complete with spelling and grammatical errors, slang, cursing, and so forth, without correction.

What I present in these results is my process and experience towards reclaiming my power and developing and seeking to integrate rejected aspects of my identity. I illustrate how I practiced engaging intra- and inter- personally from this new cohesive identity and worked on developing a secure attachment to myself, all while confronting and seeking to heal my fearful-avoidant attachment. This dissertation is about the experience—in all its gory glory—of striving for the ideals that for me are easy to articulate, but seemingly impossible to consistently uphold.

My hope is that through reading this, you, dear reader, will have an opportunity to enter into my reality, and from this, you will get an insider view of the mind of someone with fearful-avoidant attachment and a healing process that had a significant impact on me. This may help some recover from attachment wounds and transform relationships with themselves, the earth, and those they love. Of course, my story is my story, and it's only that, a story—one that led me to believe that healing comes from practice, from Being. If there is one thing I hope you take away from this dissertation, it is something I learned from Owl: if you want to be free, be your own Be, and in the meantime, do not believe a word I write.

Arts-Based, Evocative Autoethnography Means Experiential

To set the context and be in integrity with the process of experiencing versus knowing, I have provided a soundtrack gathered during my journey for you to play as you read and have compiled some of my most reflective songs, photographs and critical moments of self therapy in a movie [see Appendix C]. In addition, the results section is reflective of my experience and thus is intentionally idealistic, shocking, presumptuous, hopeful, and raw; it shifts from the collective

to first to second person, from past to present tense. It is redundant, inconsistent, repetitive, contradictory, scandalous, and disjointed, all aiming to provide you an experience through reading that mirrors my reality.

I learned that knowing my values and what serves me is irrelevant if I am not going to act accordingly. Similarly, aligned with FST, this dissertation is not solely about adding more knowledge to the CFT field, or to you as a reader; rather, it is intended to provide an experience that moves you to action. I anticipate that reading this dissertation you may be disoriented, confused, frustrated, curious, and dubious about my credentials, among other things; all of that is intentional. My hope is that you will find that any questions, discomfort, or judgements you have while reading can be used as a mirror to reflect on your own experience. I also hope your experience of reading this helps you feel, think, question, resist—or have any reaction that inspires more prioritization and acceptance of your identity and experience, and ultimately, a greater truth for you. Given this, I invite you to enter into a dialogue with yourself when and if you do have a reaction, and see what discoveries you can make. To assist in this, I have also included some questions for you, dear reader, in italics and later in the implications section.

Key Terms and Concepts

Many of the terms I use colloquially are aligned with Jungian theory (Jung et. al, 1971), which had a major influence on me in my 20s and 30s. I use *mask*, *representative*, and *ego* to represent what Jung calls the “mask or persona.” The persona is the overarching concept of the defensive structure we use to engage interpersonally with the world:

...the persona protects the coherence of individual being through projection, denial, or identification with a role (e.g, as daughter, student, parent etc.)... [and] is a defense especially against threats from others that loosen coherence, or disrupt continuity, caused

by lowered self-esteem or other threats (emotional or physical). (Young-Eisendrath & Hall, 1991, p. 6).

I use *shadow* aligned with Jungian theory:

the shadow “complex” is made up of: ‘not I’ material that is disassociated from acceptable self-representation and uses a repository of alien (and often unlikable) aspects of the self. The shadow functions also as a defense. A person uses the shadow to defend coherence by projecting or transferring alien-but-familiar qualities ‘away from the self’ to others outsiders of the world (Young-Eisendrath & Hall, 1991, p. 6).

I use *parts*, *little Rachel*, *inner child*, and *young* or *child me* as a way to delineate between different aspects of my personality that may be coming up, typically aspects connected to early life experiences. I first came upon the idea of the *inner child* through Taylor’s (1991) workbook and later learned about Internal Family Systems (IFS), a therapeutic method which seeks to help people reconcile different aspects or *parts* of the self (see Schwartz, 1994).

I also use shamanic terms or concepts. A full description is outside the bounds of this dissertation, and varies amongst different traditions, so I will share my interpretation of what was taught to me during my shamanic healing apprenticeship based on Harner’s (1980) teachings on *Core Shamanism*, a modality based on extensive global research on shamans, shamanic healing and culture:

Spirit animals are spiritual guides that present themselves in animal form.

Ordinary and *non-ordinary* refers to the shared reality of this (ordinary) world vs. the spiritual realms of the (non-ordinary) lower world, where spirit animals typically reside, or the upper world, where “other” spiritual guides can be found (Harner, 1980). Though it may be tempting to compare this to the Christian concept of earth, heaven, and hell, in the shamanic

sense, the Christian “hell” is replaced by the “lower world,” with a more accepting understanding of instinctual drives.

Shamanic Journeying or *journeying* is the practice of leaving the middle world (earth/ordinary reality) to visit one’s guides and is considered an altered state of consciousness (Harner, 1980). This is typically achieved through drumming, rattling, using psychedelics like ayahuasca, or even just walking and descending into an altered state (I do all but the psychedelics). My experience is that journeying can be loosely comparable to visualization or guided meditation. The initial process I learned was to listen to or do your own drumming or rattling, close your eyes, then picture yourself entering the lower world through an entry point in nature (like a pond or root system). Once “there” ask whoever meets you whatever it is you want to understand, then see who you meet, what unfolds, and what guidance is there for your consideration.

I struggled to come up with an appropriate name for my third attachment figure, *Source*: “Spirit” feels like a cultural appropriation and is not quite right when framing my spiritual beliefs, “Mother” is too loaded, “Mother Earth” feels too earthbound, and Bear or Spider, two central creators and overseers were too specific or also appropriations. I decided on using the term “Source” because it feels closest to being a non-gendered representation of the totality and order of ordinary and non-ordinary reality. For the purpose of this work, the term “Source” encompasses the forest, forest creatures, and ordinary (“real”) and non-ordinary (spirit) animals.

Being

*Owl says to me:
Owl’s swoop we hover too
Hover low and hover through
we ride the wind to stay afloat
we stalk in shade we dip and loop
we hear the rustle in the leaves*

*we are the things that we believe
 full aligned we find our mark
 our aim is true deep in the dark
 we only catch the things we need
 we live to live and breathe to breathe
 we're silent and we're deadly too
 we're you to me and me to you
 carry forth, you know the way
 keep your silence, Be each day
 Be and Be and Be and Be
 Be and Be and Be and Be
 this is the practice, this is the way
 this is the path, this is the stay
 in the night be you, not brave
 in the dark be every way
 true to your nature and your kind
 be honest always, sometimes kind
 kindness is a complex thing
 dance to dance sing to sing
 never hide unless you must
 To keep your quiet before the hunt
 Also, do not make a fuss
 you are your center, that's a must
 Be and Be and Be and Be
 Be and Be and Be and Be
 - Owl, September 2, 2020*

Being seemed to be the central theme from Owl (some quoted insight she shared through channeling in italics above), and from my forest time. Based on this learning, the concept of Being embodies many different ideas. At a high level, I would describe it as identity as a verb: living consciously, engaging in the present moment in alignment and full acceptance of who you are, what you “know,” how you feel, and what you do.

Being is using your senses, your animal nature, to experience the world, embracing intuition and self-trust. Being is also the only “truth,” it is the present moment and therefore the only place where we have any influence, where we can experience versus be in fantasy regarding

the illusion of the past or the future. I wanted to Be, but the only place I seemed to fully Be was in the woods.

Attachment Figures Overview

I used three attachment figures as containers for this work: myself, Source, and M, a man who I met in mid-September 2020 and subsequently tumbled in love with. I will first present the results of my process of bonding with and developing trust and confidence from Source. Due to the inconsistent nature of the other two attachment figures, Source was most consistently able to provide a secure base for me.

Source as Secure Base

I officially embarked on this dissertation journey in September, 2020, five months into a global pandemic. My (now ex) husband (of seven years), A, had just moved out of the house, though we had been living in separate spaces since March. Without relationship to a significant other, I was in a near-constant state of disassociation, disconnected from my body and from any semblance of an identity, let alone a cohesive one:

January 8, 2021: I was talking to FJ [my therapist] about the challenges I was having with love. She likened it to a roller coaster and asked me how I can find the excitement in the plummeting versus just dread. Embracing the contrast.

While she was saying this I had a memory of me in the crib. Smiling so hugely, adorable. I was thinking about the hours I spent neglected in that crib and started wondering when I stopped crying. When I realized the crying wasn't going to help me, that no one was coming for me. I wondered about the process I went through as a toddler, when did hope leave? When did I shut down from such terror and despair? How did I figure out I should try a different tactic? When did I decide I should try just being cute?

Hoping that if I was cute enough, if I was lovable enough maybe somebody would come get me?

And I was thinking about how I still do that, I still act out this childhood trauma from neglect. How I assume my tears will drive people away, so I stay silent when I am suffering. How I relentlessly seek creative solutions to problems as if my life depended on it. And how in relationship, I read people and then make myself so lovable that maybe, just maybe, somebody will come get me, pick me up, comfort me. Underneath, do I ever let myself wish that somebody would just come get me when I cried? Or perhaps somebody would stay with me, pay enough attention to me, so that I didn't need to cry at all? It makes perfect sense that I need attention, and the external gaze, not just because I was socialized as a woman, but also because I was so severely neglected.

Very early in my process I realized that if I wanted to build a secure attachment to myself, I needed a self to attach to. Additionally, if I wanted to experience intimacy (emotional and sexual) with myself and other, I needed that self to be more cohesive. However, I did not have access to a cohesive self, and, due to early and ongoing abuse and neglect and subsequent fearful-avoidant attachment style, I also did not have an internalized secure base. It seemed, to build a secure attachment I needed a cohesive identity, but to build a cohesive identity, it felt like I needed a secure attachment! I didn't know what to do, I didn't feel I could trust anyone, including and perhaps especially myself—who or what could I turn to?

July 19, 2020... this trauma [I experienced, i.e., sexual and physical abuse, early severe neglect] plays out in my life over and over in my mind and interactions; it defines my actions and reactions. It is lurking below every emotional and logical response. This is something I need to heal, and attempts to heal by building a secure bond with others have

failed spectacularly. I choose the caring introverts, the ones that seemingly use that care to distance and, it often has felt, maintain a position of power... This is different from my childhood in that I now receive care when I am sick [and not surprisingly, I have chronic illnesses, so I am sick a lot]. I have also upped my performance capabilities exponentially ... These issues [of performance, getting care from being sick were] often most obvious when I wanted intimacy or I wanted to expand, grow, or challenge: in those cases it seems I would be “too much” which would shut down my partner and thus shut me down.

I shouldn't become too big, too confident, too strong, right?

I apply this caregiver distancing with a twist as a therapist. Getting intimacy at a distance, where I never have to expose or risk vulnerability except when I can strategize the use of that vulnerability for improved clinical outcomes.

When I was in my 20s... I couldn't be alone. I literally thought I would disappear entirely, and I do think that's what I did, I disassociated and would be visited by “ghosts.” I was terrified and that terror could not be reasoned with.

In my late 20s and 30s, after EMDR and my introduction to nature as a mother, I was able to be alone and sometimes I liked it. But for the most part, I wanted, needed, to be seen. And I was seen, but mostly as an object. I used beauty as a tool in more ways than not, even as I felt ugly, fat, masculine, genderless. I was the great imposter! A magician extraordinaire! I am an exceptional mockingbird, I can even fool myself. But that beauty was untouchable...

[In my 40's] when Crow, Bear, and Mouse [my initial spirit animals] came, things started to shift in miraculous ways. I started to respect myself more, not disregard my

“otherness” ... when Owl and Eagle came, so did the [potential to] cure both my need to be witnessed and be secure [I paint owls and their eyes follow me everywhere in my home, which calms and helps me] expand more and take risks ... so I could develop and claim a new identity. Like Owl, I could be fierce without malice and vulnerable without fear. I don’t need hyper-vigilance as a superpower, because I have Eagle view, I can ride on wind in effortless power, versus use my own energy, I am not distracted by crows, I am large, fearless, and deadly. And I have Owl sight and qualities: determination, wisdom, invisibility, the capacity to rest when not hunting for prey. Barred Owl with the innocent fathomless eyes and Horned Owl with eyes that will literally scare you stiff. These gifts have helped me realize that I can focus on myself without hurting myself. Then Wolf came...

This excerpt was written as I was trying to finalize how to set up my countercultural experiment regarding attaching to the self and is included here to set some context. While I could intuit Source was an influence to my identity development, I didn’t knowingly utilize her to serve as an attachment figure. I probably would’ve dismissed this idea had I directly proposed it to myself, because one, I am a skeptic and the concept would feel too “new agey,” and two, my understanding of attachment is to seek bonding with *a person who will engage directly with me*, as I had been taught. And the woods and animals were more passive influences ... right?

April 8, 2021: It feels important to say that the symbols and signs and messages I’ve been receiving from the animals in the woods, they may not have been specifically for me. And everything is meaning-making right? So my interpretation of them could be wildly different than intended, or mere projection.

I feel better when I’m reading the messages and symbols and signs in the woods. I

feel safer. I feel held and seen, I feel cared for. These things allow me to engage in the world, in relationships in different ways, more expanded ways. Ways that lead me to believe and accept that it's the experience, and the interpretation of that experience, that has helped me develop a more secure attachment to myself. It's not the thinking. So [my experiences] helped me categorize and summarize and process the world around me and the people around me. As well as all my feelings! I don't know what I would've done during Covid without the woods. And all my woodland friends. Luckily I didn't have to find that out.

If, like in the forest, I could calm my nervous systems, trust, and accept that my interpretations and meaning-making are reflective of me vs. what is intended by others, I would have significantly improved relationships. However, as someone with my human-based injuries, I could not trust people enough to let myself bond with other humans in a healthy way. For instance, what I learned from my childhood trauma was that in order to have love, to be valued, I needed to provide value, which kept me anxious about and focused on helping and being valuable to others. It is not surprising then that I was often worried that I needed to give back to the forest somehow:

September 20, 2020, 7 am, we saw Owl today at the beginning of our walk. Magick ran her off. She flew right into a bunch of Blue Jays who were doing the usual! I put seed out and said 'I'm putting the seed out to help. Not that you need my help. I'm putting the seed out as an offering.' And that's what it's about isn't it? Owl doesn't need my help, but it's an offering, a gift. There's a huge difference there. Also note what I was thinking about when Owl came out: the practical details of my day, which was kind of a waste bc those things just need to be done. That's where I think I am [affecting] my

well-being—obsessing about the details of things and trying to control things instead of just doing what I can do and letting the rest go. That's Owl medicine isn't it? In this case, the doing is limited to right action. The knowing is only relevant when it comes to right action, the rest of the time, it's Being. Deer, blue jay, owl, have all given me gifts today. And I am returning with a gift.

While I am gaining insight, I am also romanticizing the forest *and* myself here, and that can be dangerous; as you will see, I use this technique often to justify potentially unhealthy actions. Essentially, I am in an ego place, but being in the forest calms me so I can get beyond my representative and after a few more human thoughts, I am able to access what feels like a greater truth reflective of the woods:

September 20, 2020, cont., ...Maybe the whole idea of helping is just not appropriate here. The offerings I'm providing don't just potentially benefit Owl, they potentially benefit everyone... [but] they also potentially don't benefit or even harm some. But isn't that the way with an offering? Like a monkey's paw, and Magick. It's all about balance. And not about controlling the balance either, just that naturally it all balances!

Maybe I don't have to work so hard trying to balance things because things balance on their own. In fact, the harder I try to balance things the more I have to think about what's losing, what's gaining and all that is a waste of time, it's irrelevant. I cannot control things. It will balance out, that's how nature works. It's not immediate. Let it go, Be...

I could put seed out and it could attract Mouse, which could attract Owl. But I could also put seed out and it could attract Deer, which could be putting Deer at risk from Hunter. Maybe one of the best ways to offer and be grateful for the gift that I receive is to

not interfere. But maybe it's irrelevant because it's all going to balance out anyway. Maybe I have no effect ultimately.

Or maybe my role is to just be in harmony. Alongside, with. Maybe I should stop trying so hard. Maybe it's not even about witnessing. Maybe it's just about showing up as me. However and whoever that might be at the time. And maybe sometimes it's about not showing up—being like Owl, invisible. Silent. Maybe that's what I need to embrace.

Reader, in this moment, are you Being? What helps you—no that's not the concept I'm referring to, you don't need help—what inspires you to Be? Not think, not know, not do, but to Be, fully Be in yourself? You don't need support, you don't need self-help; but because of your conditioning, you may need some bravery? You may need some trust or faith maybe? You may need some self-soothing, some silencing, like Owl, some quiet. These things may help you to be. Being may be the only way to know who you really are, not in reaction to other people, but in alignment with yourself. Whoever that is. Whatever gifts and yuckies that you may Be, whatever is uncomfortable, whatever feels great, whatever you long for, maybe that's not just OK, maybe that's essential. And maybe you already "know this" but are you Being it?

The woods attempted to teach me that I did not need to, nor should I attempt to, "help" them; not only was it a waste of energy given nature *is* balance, my interference could have unintended consequences. The forest also suggested that my near constant striving to help others and achieve balance in so many aspects of my life, but perhaps especially in relationships, was futile and potentially dangerous. Still, that day, my stubborn socialization regarding "providing value" tried to find a back route, and I dictated a bunch of questions for you, the reader, to consider (in italics), you know, to be helpful.

So my attachment and identity dilemma continued; in order to develop trust, I needed a reliable and straightforward source to hold me, but I did not trust humans enough to hold me without it being transactional. On the other hand, my interaction with the forest and her animals in ordinary reality taught me that while they may not be invested in me, I could trust them, but I also needed to be invested in and trust myself:

October 21, 2020, I like to think that the animals have some sort of interest in me. That I'm chosen, or special. I often ask them to visit me. Hoping that they can prove to me that I'm important. But I'm wondering or imagining that it's very different from that. Owl for instance is doing Owl stuff. And because I'm doing Owl stuff too, then I see her. This is another way of "being" versus needing to feel chosen or special externally.

Earlier in our walk I cried a little bit thinking about how grateful I was for the woods and for the trees And then, grateful... it was less that they were doing something for me, of course, it was that they were Being; that I was in the woods with all these beings. And I was also Being. And we were Being together. And I felt in full alignment. I felt held in "Being" not being something external to others but through the experience of Being and seeing other beings Being.

It makes me think that it's not about being chosen, it's about resonance. And I suppose resonance is the same as synchronicity in a way isn't it? But you don't have to wait for others to "choose you" using this paradigm. You have to choose you. And maybe that's part of freedom as well.

I went on this afternoon hike in the woods immediately after my divorce court hearing. Later that day, I wrote a song based on what the woods gave me and what I dictated in caring for myself (Things are Beginning at the End, Appendix C). This combination of Source and self-care

resulted in a decidedly different experience than the one I expected on such a challenging day.

Source was a formidable, yet loving, presence; but still, can you securely attach to someone who does not even know you exist? Someone fundamentally indifferent to you? EFT declares one needs attunement, responsiveness, and emotional engagement (ARE) to develop a secure attachment (Johnson, 2008), and in a way, the forest and her creatures provided ARE, just not as I imagined. I could count on them to be there for me, to teach me lessons, to soothe me, and in many ways, respond to my presence. Similarly, one or another of my spirit animals are always on call and willing to help, even if their lessons are painful, seem passive, or at least requiring translation (e.g., how not communicating is a form of communication). It seemed that Source in all her manifestations may be indifferent to me, but they are still connective.

Developing Identity and a Secure Bond, thus Increasing Exploration

I used my experiences with the woods and animals as a mirror, to explore the qualities of animals that I could then identify and accept in myself. Specifically, witnessing and journeying with animals helped me take steps towards accepting my shadow parts. Animals do not live by societal rules. There are no oppressive norms or gendered expectations that alter their thinking or behavior, so they *are* what they teach, is that not the purest example of Being?

April 15, 2021: How do we form identity? It seems that a lot of cultures use stories to teach morals, values and [culturally acceptable] actions. I was raised on fairy tales, and the narratives I had in my mind were therefore toxic [and thus to build a more cohesive identity] I needed new stories. That's where the animals came in. And the trees. They gave me new stories, new morals, new ways to act, new ways to be that I respected, that I could aspire to, that I could try on and practice. These animals are obviously outside of the social construct, so while my interpretations could've been influenced by the social

construct, their behavior was separate. I could trust them. They aren't influenced by humans. They're wild. And being wild they showed a different way that we could be, one that made more sense to me. That seemed more peaceful, less tainted by humanity.

Animals *are* still affected by context for survival—[they are] not emotionally damaged by it, but rather adaptive—animals survive without insecurity, greed, vengeance, fear or at least anxiety, and corruption.

Being wild is where self-interest is not only embraced but essential, without hurting anybody else unnecessarily. There's integrity in animals, you can trust them. They're honest, they won't try to trick or make a fool of you, any trickery is for survival.

Many animals can sense danger, they can see through human ruses, because they can feel your energy. They operate on lessons learned *and* on instinct, something that we have shunned for the mind—but for me the mind is dangerous in a lot of ways, so the animals became my guides because they were the only ones that were real. That I could trust and take at face value.

It was my interpretations that I needed to be suspicious about. And that's also where I learned—through looking at my interpretations and judgments. For instance this morning, listening to Wood Thrush's songs, some of my reactions: "what a show off!", "Is she singing just for joy or for a mate?", "What is she trying to communicate?" "Who can hear her?" "Who's responding to her?" "Is she lonely?" All of these are reflective of my ongoing struggles and reality. So in this way, when I experience animals, I learn about and accept myself, I develop identity, and I experience freedom.

I could rely on non-human animals to comfort me and give me ideas on how to Be. My spirit animals or the woods provided insight or instructional guidance on ways to Be *in action* and

within a larger context. As someone who thinks deeply and systemically, this wholeness, alignment, and integrity helps me trust without questioning, thus I could immediately try out those ideas; essentially, I could test Being whoever I am within a variety of contexts. I critically needed this help to quiet my anxious mind so I could experience more, and feel like I was living in integrity with myself; Owl was a constant teacher in this realm:

September 21, 2020, As I was talking to the woods about the shift from avoiding to entering pain and fear, I said, "...yes, like what Owl says. Listen to Owl." And in comes Owl as I was saying her name. She lands on this dead tree, Madgie runs [towards her] so she flies up into the next tree over and I sit under her and I watch her and I cry. [After a few minutes] she flies, in total silence, watching, looking around her, curious, open, it was fucking amazing!

I can't even believe it. But that disbelief, that's my mind right? This is not about believing. This is experiencing. And the shift between avoiding and entering into just happened; something always happens next. And not getting caught on these thoughts, these feelings, these fears, just walking into them! It's a fucking miracle! Something happens next. And then again and again and again. And that's life ...

We got up to the top [of Panthera] and when we peeked, there was a lone goose, she started crying out. Her flock, it seems, have left her behind. I cried and cried. If she's alone she will not make it. I thought of her crying and crying. The call was echoing so loud and only the blue jays responded. I hated to leave. I hope she finds them again. ♥

[Video of these Owl and Goose encounters is in Appendix C].

Owl suggested I could only believe what I experienced, not what I thought about. She also suggested that even when I have fear and pain (like the lone goose), I could enter into, instead of

seeking to avoid, and thus not attach to that fear and pain, because something always happens next.

March 8, 2021, When I'm in the woods I feel like I very rarely think about problems.

That's probably not going to become true once I go through all of my notes but what I mean is I'm not ... always looking for problems when I'm in the woods, maybe it's just that I feel hope? I feel secure? I feel at home? I just don't spiral down, I spiral up. And just like yesterday, when I chose to play guitar to ground myself and feel good, I know I have the woods to help me spiral up or at the very least to just Be.

In addition to spiraling up and not thinking about problems, when in the woods, I do not disparage myself. I do not think about my age or my body other than loving on it, and I do not worry about what I look like; which reinforces my belief that my typical body shame is not just from direct trauma, it is societal. Thus, Source gives me insight and alternate options on how to interpret information:

October 10, 2020 Poem/Tree

Tree, sensing rest is soon to come, lets go. Shedding all that captured wet and light, all that quenched and fed. All that sheltered others. All that danced on wind that tickled and tore, flirted and swore she would come back.

Tree sheds her beauty outrageously and with delight. A burst of shape-shifting ready seeming redder, oranger, more yellow than the next.

Wind returns, as promised, tasting death—in lust and rage and joy and yes she helps with the disrobing.

One last moonlight shadow before the shift—naked, exposed, Tree sleeps. She sleeps and sleeps.

bare to snow to ice to rain to wind

bare to all, to take her in, in all her spindly mangled sight, reaching, reaching in the night but open, raw, exposed and supple still

Tree is Tree regardless of the leaving. Tree knows when it's time to end and when it's time to begin again.

This poem, written during my writing group while sitting in my backyard observing the autumn trees, felt both reassuring and instructional: I could let go of my conditioning, I could be brave, I

could be safe, even when vulnerable. To accomplish this I needed to Be, to trust and rest, because loss and pain is inevitable and necessary for transformation. Yes, I will be abandoned by others (leaves all leave), and at times this transformation will hurt, it will be dark, and it will take bravery and effort; but in the Spring, everything will begin again. With this confidence, the forest and animals helped me integrate rejected parts of my identity and face ways my socialization was affecting my ability to do so. For instance, Tree helped me realize that seeking to meet external standards is missing the point; a worthier aim is to be more yourself:

October 13, 2020: What's a Tree compliment? I started of course, with "you're so beautiful! you're so wise! you're so tall and strong! You're such a great witness! You're so steadfast! You're so perfectly designed! You're so selfless and generous! You are such a good caretaker, role model!" And then I was like, that is all not a compliment for Tree. Here [are real Tree compliments]: "Oh Tree! You're so yourself! So perfectly Tree." "Owl! You're so perfectly Owl! When you miss, when you don't, when you fly straight or crooked, when you rest, you're perfectly Owl." Applying that to self-Rachel. "Rachel, you're so perfectly Rachel! You do exactly what Rachel does! Everything you do, think, feel is exactly Rachel-like, thus always yes.

Tree suggested if you want to Be, you need true self-acceptance of what is; you do not have to be or do anything other than be who you are to be valuable.

I continue to struggle with just Being. It is a practice, but that practice can be exhausting and terrifying. The forest and animals gave me strength and held me so I could move into and through this process. For instance, one of the first trials in my journey towards self-attachment and cohesive identity was walking into my fears. These trials were not exactly voluntary; I was about to live alone for the first time in eight years, in isolation/quarantine, for an indeterminate

amount of time and winter was coming—I was going to be afraid. The time had come to face the darkness. Now all I needed was bravery and a new perspective on *how* to move through fear; I sought guidance from my spirit animals...

August 23, 2020: I did a journey today. Asked what to be like during the divorce. Owl taught me: blend in, be stealthy, stay below the trees, enjoy the night, feed the babies first so they fly away. Then enjoy. Eat Mouse, not Squirrel, be still, face darkness, no fear, pay attention more, move past fear into night, see darkness and light together. Don't watch, Be. Be with self to view the world through the eyes of self [not outside of]. This is the first time that I merged fully with a spirit animal: Owl insisted that I stay inside of her and view the world through her eyes. Each time I popped back out she insisted I come back in.

Centering my experience inside of Owl, I considered the idea that my identity and experience of the world seemed dependent upon other people and not centered on me. I had known for a long time that I was a chameleon, but I was not aware how much I was using relationships and adapting to others, not just to please them, but also as a means of defining myself. I could not work with my fear if I was not able to be in my own body and view things through my own lens. Owl, with her Being, gave me a framework on *how* to face my fears, and she offered her body and lens to embody reality when I was too scared to be in mine.

As part of my work when I was alone, I experimented with this idea, but when thinking about others and trying to live from my own lens, I found either blankness or rejected aspects of myself. Thus, my fear and anxiety would increase. Bear came to my rescue. She not only provided comfort, she also modeled bravery to help me develop trust and confidence in myself.

August 25, 2020, I can't settle my thoughts. My mind is bouncing from one thing to the next. I'm crazy anxious. Each thought I have gets worse and worse, it's all

catastrophizing, everything is falling apart. I decided to do the stage exercise. I project onto the stage the part of me that jumps from thing to thing, from fear to fear. I put on the stage the little girl demon (cloud with body parts whirling became little girl, maybe 6 years old) that I've always feared, I don't know what to do, so scared, Bear came in and hugged her and I was like "I wouldn't do that if I were you" and bear said, "don't worry, I got this" Bear held that whirling dervish, and she turned into this little girl, in and out of demon form, the more Bear held her calmly, the less she was in demon form and the more she cuddled into Bear's arms. Bear invited me to be in her arms too and I came in.

And as Bear was holding me and holding the little girl, I looked up at Bear and Bear became the demon, ferocious! Razor teeth! Terrifying! I was horrified but instead of screaming or running like I usually would do, I said "OK just eat me." Bear ate me and suddenly I was looking out of Bear's eyes holding the little girl feeling strong and sheltering. Fearless. I popped back out and walked back into Bear's arms. I looked at the little girl and felt so sad for her. I realized in that moment that I can be held by Bear, or I could be Bear, but either way I'm safe. I finally feel safe. You are safe either way, you can walk into the mouth of fear, relinquish control, and find that you are Bear, you can hold the little girl or be held, in the end, walk into fear.

I may have "known" that fear was an illusion, but I needed to experience it, to try on Being this idea, and Bear, who is a central figure in my healing journey, was an ideal teacher. Bear helps me find, accept, and integrate what she symbolizes (confidence, courage, strength, right action, healing, leadership) into my consciousness and thus identity. Bear is also grounding, and during my dissertation journey served as a constant reminder that self-care through rest and solitude is essential for healing. In the above example, Bear said, "if you can summon the courage to walk

right into fear and pain instead of fighting it, the pain and fear go away—here, let me show you.”

Unfortunately, despite all the reminders and attempts to stay conscious, I often *thought* I was walking into fear and pain, but I was still judging, avoiding, and resisting truly accepting fear and pain. This would perhaps especially happen when my defenses were there to block my ability to accept parts of myself. The more I blocked self-acceptance, the more the pain lingered or repeated.

In essence, despite my best conscious efforts, I was *attaching* to the pain and fear instead of moving into and through it to discover who or what I was on the other side. Moving into pain and fear still seemed like too great of a risk for my fractured self. If I were to go in, was I to find the lifetime of internal monsters I had feared, shunned, and avoided were scared, broken parts looking to be seen and held, like the mouse afraid of her shadow? Was I about to fall into the abyss never to return? Was I brave and strong enough to find out? Sometimes.

September 3, 2020: I had a dream on this night, the night before A moved out. The banshee woman, who has always terrorized me in my dreams, came running at me down the hallway and I took out a towel and whipped it around and pushed her out the door with it. Once the door was closed I threw my arms up and yelled “vanquished!” I woke up terrified, I called in Bear and Owl and asked them to look out over me, and for the first time in my life after a nightmare, I felt fully safe. I didn’t catastrophize or spiral down. I just went back to sleep. I am totally going to be fine living alone. Not just fine but better.

This dream and the aftermath are important aspects of my building confidence to face fear. One, I finally “vanquished” my dream tormenter using a towel of all things, not very fierce, and also perhaps a message that much of my fear was just surface fear versus an actual threat. Two, when

scared, I finally remembered to call in my spirit animals, versus seeking comfort from others (and risking disappointment), and it worked!

At times the animals and nature soothed me so I could face my fears; other times they helped me walk through—or pushed me into—fears if need be. For instance, for my adult life I have had a phobia about cockroaches. Not fear, or disgust, or hatred—no, I had a full-on phobia, panic attacks, dissociation, etc. The day after my ex husband moved out of the house, he came back to clean up with a close friend. I decided to make them soup. As they were pulling into the driveway, a bug ran across my crockpot; I killed it. I suspected it was a roach, and at first I did not believe it. I have seen two roaches in all my time in Massachusetts, both in the city. They do not even have roach killer at my local hardware store. I insisted A and our friend look at it. A refused to believe it either, then moved the crockpot and another bug came out. I absolutely freaked out, ran outside, and I am inconsolable. I texted a photo to the exterminator, he confirmed it was a roach, but he could do nothing given it was a holiday weekend ...

September 5, 2020: "...I would keep an eye on it and check tonight after the lights have been off for a while... German roaches would be on your counter after dark ... wood roaches don't infest homes so if you don't see anymore after this then it would be nothing to worry about.' I call my sister, she says: 'oh yeah sure! I'll just creep into my kitchen in the dark, at night, all by myself, the first night fully alone in the house, and when it's full dark I'll flip the light switch on and yell 'gotcha!' 'No seriously', I said, 'I'll just up and see if anything terrifying skitters across my countertop.' HELL NO. I call my close friend MK... hysterically crying and ask her to come over to help me as I cannot reenter my house, she does. I try to calm myself by looking at the spiritual meaning of roaches, "getting rid of negative influences, resilience, embracing the dark." I didn't do a sting

operation in the kitchen last night. I did in the bathroom at night though. There's nothing. There's no way there are roaches in this house. I live in the dark, I would've seen something scurry across my countertop at some point. A and MK both cleaned everything out, there is not a sign of roaches. I guess we'll see when I renovate the kitchen.

Exploring my experience using spirit animals and the forest as an attachment figure helped me develop bravery and new meanings for things that scared me and thus transformed my fears into gifts. I felt seen and held by the woods and animals, even when they were not gentle with their lessons. For example, hubris is another aspect of my identity I have rejected and thus projected onto others. Yellow Jacket forced me to look at my hubris without attacking my confidence...

September 7, 2020, Today I'm in the woods with H [a man I briefly considered dating], and I'm telling him about the whole situation from yesterday. I'm explaining how A said "you got over Wasp, you got over Yellow Jacket, Roach is next." And as I'm sharing this with him, I step on a yellow jacket nest. Excruciating pain in my ankle—what the fuck is that? I'm getting stung by yellow jackets. There's another up near my shoulder and H kills it. Another flying over my head. We run.

Messages from Yellow Jacket and Roach during a journey yesterday: don't get cocky about magick, "this is not the destination, this is just the beginning"...

Yellow Jacket said, "don't get too ahead of yourself" but also, "you are strong and brave: you survived stepping on a yellow jacket nest, you can do anything!" I was also told by Yellow Jacket and Roach that the magick I was experiencing was not what was important, it was just the beginning of my journey. I wrote a song about this three days later (Just the Beginning).

The animals warned me not to take things that are not meant for me, and they also pushed me to confront my denial and let go of things that do not serve me...

September 7, 2020 cont., Later in the walk H finds an Owl feather and tries to give it to me. I tell him it's not mine, and try to hand it back but he says "you must've dropped it". At some point before returning to my car, I lose that feather. It wasn't mine to begin with. And I'm not scared of Yellow Jacket. Even though they hurt like hell.

Later on I think to myself: You are holding onto things like a zombie with embalming fluid, you can see the bits falling off, your nose falls off, and you're still in denial, still trying to glue it back onto rotting flesh. Let it go. Dissolve, go into the abyss, into Bear with the razor teeth, so you can become Bear.

Owl told me, don't hold onto what isn't yours, including fear:

September 9, 2020, Shared Roach and Yellow Jacket story with AW [another shamanic friend] on the trail. She reminds me of Roach being a symbol for resiliency and ancient knowing ... what a gift that is. As I finish telling her the story about the owl feather [that was given to me but I lost] I look down and at the end of the trail is another owl feather. It's downey at the bottom as if to keep her warm. I will be warm and safe and silent.

Thank you Owl.

When I own my truth, let go, and only take what is mine; I am rewarded. Despite my best efforts, my internalized process of growth usually uses punishment to motivate or teach me. Alternately, the animals taught me through modeling that I needed to stay awake and engaged in my life.

Often it would seem like the animals were in cahoots to help me learn:

September 20, 2020, The pain we have is the avoidance of pain. The fear we have is the avoidance of fear.

Journey [Yesterday], before I emptied my kitchen out, I journeyed to Roach. I promised to work with them if they promised to leave my home. I was Mouse and was

eaten by Roach, then me, as Roach, found my group and threw up Mouse. The group descended on and ate her. I gave myself as Mouse up as a sacrifice, an offering, to appease them and let them know I promise to work with them if they promised to leave. When MK and I cleared out the kitchen there was not one roach or sign of a roach. How can that be??

This afternoon my cat Ozzy went to live with his dad. I wailed on and off all day. I needed to let him go because he was too needy, the 2 kids were too much for me. A wanted him and had given away his beloved cat when he first moved in with me. It restored a cosmic balance and was heartbreaking. Saying goodbye to Ozzy. Hearing him cry in the cat carrier. Knowing I was letting him go bc I needed to focus on me. I can't even.

This morning, I woke to find Ozzy on the other side of my bed sitting near something. He had caught a mouse, eaten her head and thrown her up. Ozzy, on his last day with me, gave me a gift, an offering, this was his first mouse kill in 3 years together. I was so proud of him and honored and devastated...I put the mouse outside under the cherry tree and covered her with a flower. When I walked with JK today he suggested perhaps this mouse sacrifice indicated Mouse spirit energy was moving away from me now and I thought, yes, Mouse sacrifices herself and I will not do that any longer. Mouse replaced by Cockroach. Perhaps. But you can't not be amazed at the timing.

My journey, and the subsequent gift from Ozzy, gave me strength and helped me accept my decision to prioritize myself even when it resulted in pain, grief, and loss.

Cockroach shows up multiple times over the next two months, literally and figuratively. Figuratively, I worked with Roach as a totem and learned much from that experience, eventually

curing my lifelong phobia. Literally, I had 5 or 6 actual roach encounters in my house, one where a roach skitters out of my refrigerator (!) before convincing the exterminator to help me.

When the exterminator finally came in mid-October, he first confirmed that the sample roach I killed was a German Cockroach (the kind that infest houses!) versus the common wood roach. I kept my cool because Roach and I were buds now, right? After he went through the house putting the bait out, he came to me and said, “Lady, if you didn’t have that dead roach as proof, I’d have assumed you were hallucinating. There is not one sign of cockroaches here, let alone an infestation.” Do you believe in symbolism, signs, and magick? I do.

However, my journey wasn’t all discovery and magick. As time went on, I had to admit that I was self-medicating with alcohol as a way of avoiding other difficult feelings, such as sadness and loneliness. My time in the woods helped me to see myself clearly and experience emotions I was suppressing.

October 29, 2020, Here’s a little known fact, when I took one of those scientifically accurate Facebook quizzes, OK It wasn’t Facebook but, like, Audubon quizzes on what kind of bird I am, I came up with Canadian goose. I was pissed, I gotta tell you. I couldn’t accept it. So of course I took the quiz like five more times thinking, obviously I’m going to be a raven or a crow. That was not the case. Also important to note that I was never a goose again either, since I kept changing my answers. Because that’s the kind of girl I am. Anyway, I’m sharing that story because I know I’m going to think of it when I read this again.

Perhaps it seems silly, but sharing that story was an important step in me being honest with myself, in accepting that my ego has a strong influence on me and can be wily. Also, I could share my embarrassment with the forest, she does not judge and disparage; why should I?

Ultimately, I had used that levity to distance myself from what occurred moments before...

October 29, 2020 cont., When Magick and I got up to the top of Panthera and as we were walking up to our spot, we heard a lone goose again, crying out from way across the pond, the sound echoing. And I was like ‘oh no! Not again! Somebody come and get her!’ So we sat down and we listened, and soon she got silent. And she called out again and got silent again.

And then from far away I heard this little squeak. And then it got louder, and I looked up and there was another goose crying way up in the foggy clouds. As soon as, I guess, the lone goose sensed this one—or heard it, saw it, felt it or smelled it, who knows—she started screaming again. And this new goose was flying so high, she flew over calling out—the one on the pond was calling out louder, faster in return, but she didn’t stop, she flew past and away into the fog again. And I was like ‘oh no! Come back for her! You can help each other! There needs to be at least two of you in the winter!’

My momentarily hopeful heart was a little broken again.

Then there was a far away boom (was that a gunshot?!). And the lone goose, who was still crying out to the sky, became quiet again. We watched for another five minutes, and then we heard a squeak again. And we heard that massive echoing sound of the lone goose calling out again “Come get me! Come get me! I’m right here! Come get me!” And the goose high up in the sky circled around and called back and they started calling to each other and then the goose up in the sky—we watched her come out of the fog, and the lone goose got louder and louder and the far away goose got louder and louder and she flew down and landed on the water. And it was deafening, hearing the two of them reunited.

And then there was silence. And I wept.

How does one goose get left behind? Does she, like, just go for some tea and then everyone leaves? How could it happen? Was she sick or injured? Was she too tired to go on? Was it the same lone goose? Or another one? What did we just witness? A rescue mission? Two geese alone finding each other? A reunion? Does it matter? I don't think so. So I guess I do resonate, with the trees in their silence and contentment, and with the goose in wanting to be found

My field notes are filled with stories about how the forest and ordinary and non-ordinary (spirit) animals helped me trust that I was held and cared for; and helped me identify, accept, and integrate parts of myself I had rejected and thus projected. This gave me access to new ways of Being. These seemingly magickal interactions helped me feel I was special and seen and encouraged me to connect to and act in full alignment with myself. Trees, the forest and animals appear throughout my results, because they are my constant companions.

More than anything else, my main spirit animals Owl, Bear, Mouse, Crow, Wolf, and Eagle, have helped me form a more cohesive identity as I accept and integrate their qualities into my being. In particular, during this work they taught me about shape-shifting, the ability to access and utilize altered sight to stay in alignment and integrity with myself—I can view situations through any of their eyes and this gives me expanded sight, options, and grounding, even as things are rapidly changing. I also learned from the animals that if I reject or ignore myself, I will not be able to center my experience on myself, and if I cannot center myself, I cannot successfully connect with others. Integrating these lessons, choosing and accepting myself, as a whole person, not only helped my identity, it also helped me navigate some extremely painful attachment issues.

Self as Secure Base***Letter from Little Rachel to Old Rachel June 18, 2018***

In June of 2018, I wrote my little self a letter. It consisted of an apology and attempts to reassure my little self that she (I) was good and worthy and lovable. A couple of days later, I put myself into my child self and responded. Here is what little me wrote:

6/16/18

Dear Old Rachel,

Thank you for your heartfelt letter. I couldn't finish it because I'm angry. I heard all of your reasons and I believe you but I don't trust you. I feel like you are making excuses. You should've done better. You should've seen me hurting and cared, listened, how can you act this way to someone hurting? I'm mad at you! You wouldn't talk to a stranger you hated the way you talk to me. I know you have little patience but you would never kick a dog or say mean demeaning things to someone who didn't understand your language. You left me all alone and scared and even now you're trying to edit me. If you want forgiveness or better yet, if you want me to feel loved and seen and worthy you need to act that way, you need to see me in the way you see other people. All the time you want people to see you the way you see them. Well let me tell you, you're not applying your words nor your intention to yourself. Maybe if you spent a 10th of the time looking at me, at us, than you spend helping other people, you could feel seen and strong and whole. I'm not a priority for you. I'm not your number one focus. Other people are. I see you're scared and hurting and maybe that's because I am SCARED and hurting. Because I'm all alone here trying to survive in a hostile world with no one to see or comfort or guide me. I do not blame you for what happened when we were both small. I

don't even blame me for not being able to do a better job growing up and caring for me. I understand I have been loud and angry and screaming for help for so very long and that I can be overwhelming. That I have strength and power that is being focused in a way that also hurts us. That my lack of trust makes it so you can't continue to grow and LEAD Us because I won't let go but I could do that better if you did a better job leading us, keeping us safe, comforting me instead of telling me to shut up or shaming me. I guess what I'm saying is that we are both responsible and there are things I need from you if I am to feel safe enough to quiet down. Your words are nice to hear but I need to FEEL your intention

I need you to:

1. Prioritize us. healthwise, emotionally, physically, with time, attention, self-care. I need us to be FIRST on your list ... first you care for us and then ... others—I need to feel that you care about us. Direct your care and attention, love, resources, time and efforts to our well-being...
2. I need you to stop saying hurtful things to us. Stop repeating society's ills and applying them to us. Who cares if we are beautiful and slim, if we age, find our value and worth and love [indecipherable]
3. Let me be sad, happy, scared etc. I need to feel my feelings and so do you.
4. Stick up for us and stop worrying what other people may or may not think. Who cares?? Really, because if we have each other and we are not dependent on others to give us care, then if someone doesn't like something we're not going to die! We cannot allow our sense of self to be dependent upon what others see in us or how they treat us. They are irrelevant. Because if we fully love ourselves, we would find others like us to also love us and see us and play with us. We don't

have to become what other people want if we are truly as awesome as you say we are. If we are loved and worthy and funny, smart etc. etc. brave all these things then when other people act in certain ways it's likely about them not about us so they can deal with their stuff, we are not the savior of the world! See point 1 for more of this

5. Stop making me be the wise one. You may know what I'm saying above but you don't act like it and that is not wisdom. Wisdom is knowing, feeling, acting in accordance and from a place of love. I cannot let go until you prioritize this regularly. I cannot go off and play until you integrate your big brain into your actions. Doing this for others makes us "seen" but only as a healer/helper, not as a whole being, if you're not doing it for us, you're not being authentic and genuine or at the very least you are not being honest.
6. Love me. All of me. Protect me, all of me. Step up. Be brave, be real, be fearless, be a hero to us, a healer to us, a friend, lover, savior, sister, mother, shamanic healer to us. Give us the gifts you work so hard to provide to others. Acknowledge us the way you wish others would acknowledge us. This covers talents to fears to hopes to all of it. Be my best friend in the whole world. Keep your house clean for you, look how you want to look, act how you want to act. Love how you want to be loved. Let others in when you feel they can contribute to us, not just when you feel you can contribute to them.

If you want forgiveness. If you want me to feel loved, seen, worthy, then show me I'm loved, seen and worthy don't just TELL ME. Stop focusing on others so much, stop worrying that you're being selfish by paying attention to us. Stop giving out oxygen first

to others. Stop bending to others beliefs and start finding your own. Stop only helping others to see, feel, love before me. Stop thinking that just because you know you can help others you're actually applying these things to us. Wake up. Be the kind loving brave perfectly you person you are *to us*. Ask for what you want. Move on if you can't get it. Give us what you give or want from others. Stand up for us. Even if that means walking away. Stop investing where you are not receiving in return and when you are receiving... stop pushing them away. Here's another area where you were making me lead. We are most ourselves when I'm out being playful or silly or a kid. This is when we are calm and connected and joyful.

It's time you also connect as "healer" but how are you connecting as a grown woman? How are you expressing needs and wants as an adult? Do you even know what you want? Are you asking for it? Are you advocating for us from a place of love and strength? From your heart? Or just from me or from defenses? You wonder why you're tired and it's because you're making a kid do adult stuff all the time. You're giving to others what you're not giving yourself. It's enough. You need to figure out how to get this done but I wager if you follow what I wrote before that will at least be a good place to start. Even now you're thinking we both have to care for us and how to apply to other people. Maybe you think it's selfish to put us first but that's bullshit. If you're not fully you, strongly standing in YOU you're not being real. You are pollen only, when you want to be a tree. Grow roots. Reach to the sky. Stay grounded, bend, weave, be water, flow, adapt, stop fighting this. **AND STOP APOLOGIZING FOR WHO YOU ARE. LEAVE SPACE** For people to give you feedback if they don't "like" something then decide how to respond. Don't try to anticipate everything and change accordingly! Be you! Stop

apologizing. You have no reason to apologize.

I love you. I do. I just want you to be a grown-up. We deserve it.

(Little) Rachel

I loved this letter and was proud of the process and insight; however, I did not listen and I did not follow my sage advice. If I were to do all of those things my young self said, it likely would have woken me up out of my fantasy (that my marriage was solid, that I was getting what I needed, that I was providing self-love, etc.) Instead, true to form, I did *exactly* what my child self told me not to do: I came up with ways I could help other people apply the “wisdom” I gave myself; then guided them through working with *their* inner children. I again left myself alone in the crib, waiting for someone who, it seemed, would never return. In hindsight, I think I did not listen because I was not ready to see and feel what would come up if I prioritized myself. I was not ready to see how unhappy I was, and I certainly was not ready to see how much I did not trust myself.

Truth, Lies, and Integrity

Trust is a central component of a relationship. Without trust, how can one feel secure? How can you trust when you feel that the information you are receiving is incomplete or not true? Even after receiving this letter, *assessing whether or not I trusted myself was something I had not ever considered, have you?*

When I did consider it, I realized even adult me did not trust myself. How could I? I was not trustworthy: I did not prioritize myself, I continued to avoid or make bad decisions that hurt me, I was constantly rejecting myself and thus projecting and putting myself in the victim role, I was (likely still am) living in a fantasy, and of course, there was the matter of listening to myself, which I definitely was not doing. How could I build trust with myself if I would not even listen

to what I was trying to communicate? How could I build trust with myself when I was straight up lying to myself?

I become furious when someone lies to me, which, given my tendency to project, indicates that I am a liar. I hypothesized that my (unconscious) lying to myself seemed to be an effort to avoid making changes that would be significantly disruptive, or out of fear that if I let myself see the truth, I would become a puddle on the floor and get trapped in that feeling forever. My (mostly unconscious) lying to others seemed in response to fear that I would be judged, rejected, and then abandoned if I prioritized my needs or showed up as my real, flawed self. Still, having this knowledge did nothing to change my behavior. What I was learning from experimenting with raw honesty was that truth and lies are ideas to be debated, what was important was living with integrity.

November 9, 2020 Last night [on a date with someone] I said... ‘you can’t really expect much from people, you can’t even expect honesty.’ She was really taken aback by that...And I was like ‘Well, I mean honesty is a relative term don’t you think?...I really thought that I was being honest in my marriage, turns out I was living in a fantasy.’ Was I being honest with myself? Part of me says yes, part of me says hell no. I wasn’t being honest with myself, I wasn’t looking at what was real, I was making shit up, I was projecting, and I was lying to myself. And then I was lying to other people. So that’s not honesty. I told her, “what I expect from people is integrity. And by that I mean being in touch with yourself, really checking and really seeing if it feels true for you, and then sharing that with the understanding that what feels true is going to change, might change, will change etc. It’s not true forever, but it feels true in the moment with the information that you have.”

...That's what I'm looking for: self-awareness and living in integrity. I don't want to be falsely reassured, my ego does, but I don't. Because I know [being falsely reassured] scares the shit out of me. It doesn't reassure me, it makes me more and more anxious. It sets up unrealistic expectations and promises and then I start worrying about them because I know somewhere, I guess, that those aren't truths. Those are fantasies. That sort of reassurance ...

Ha ha! I think I'm getting it now. Maybe ... it's like "in this moment I feel insecure. Let me be in integrity around that, let us both respect that. Let us see that and honor that and say OK that's what it is. And breathe into it." I don't want or need, I guess, to be reassured in that moment. I need to self-soothe, or listen to what's coming up for me. What is it that I'm feeling... does it mean anything or is it just discomfort, is it feeling, is it fear, is it other information that might be important?

I don't want to be soothed actually, or reassured. I want my feelings to be respected and have that be OK. [But I worry about honesty from others given my sensitivity to criticism, especially when people set boundaries with me or advocate for themselves sexually, which I often experience as rejection] ...But that's what we got to work on right? If you don't want me in this moment, that doesn't mean that I am undesirable, and that doesn't mean that's a reflection of me, it's a reflection of you and how you feel and that's fine! My sense of self, my desire, it's not dependent upon your emotional response and desire. It's something that stands alone. My wanting can continue even if you're not wanting me. As uncomfortable as that might be. This feels rich and important.

Reading this again six months later I am thinking to myself: "If only I had read and applied this

whole thing on ‘not needing reassurance but rather needing self-soothing’ over the winter! It would have saved me months of agony!” However, again, this was information I already “had” and “knew” but was not, apparently, able to apply. It seems I could not, or at least did not, *really* listen to myself and *really* put these values into action then...

Anyway, back to being a liar. I like to think lying is a tricky concept—if you are not conscious of your truth, is that a lie? What if you believe what you are saying when you say it, but then later change your mind, is that a lie? For me, in addition to constantly gathering new information and thus changing my mind (making me inconsistent and contradictory), despite my best efforts, I am also often in denial and trying to bargain, fantasize, or distract. If I framed all of that as lying, I would just get stuck in a self-rejection shame spiral that would (based on history) likely become too much and thus would shift to projection and judging others, read: more denial.

Instead of shame and blame, I am looking to be self-aware and take personal responsibility for my defenses and actions (see what I did there with that reframing? I tried to get away with bad behavior, as long as I own it. Is that ok? I do not know!) This type of living in integrity is essential for my ability to attach to myself. So yes, I *want* to behave with integrity, but actually living in integrity and developing trust with myself was complicated:

September 14, 2020, Some lies (or unsubstantiated claims) I’ve told myself lately: “I could basically just get this dissertation done right now, this recent transformation is all I need.” “This drink doesn’t count.” “I don’t care that my skinny jeans now fit, I’m over caring about what I look like, I’m only going to be with people that see me for who I am underneath this façade.” “I’m not attached to Z, I don’t even think about him half the time.” “I’m totally over my marriage” “there is no magic in my experiences with Owl, Yellow Jacket, Roach, Blue Jay” “there is magic in my experiences with Owl, Yellow

Jacket, Roach, Blue Jay” “I’ve basically been practicing Buddhism for a long time” “the Upanishads are totally different than what I’m talking about” “the Upanishads are exactly the same as what I’m talking about in my dissertation” “the trees talk to me, I just have to listen.” “the trees don’t talk to me” “I’m over my fears.”

I think the above is a good start at accepting I was reassuring and misleading myself with false claims, because I did not want to deny myself something that I wanted. Once I started exposing myself without repercussions, I built confidence to dig deeper...

September 14, 2020 cont. ...“I’m only throwing up this once, because I drank too much. And I feel sick, and I don’t want...[fill in justifications]” “I only take antidepressants to curb my appetite” “If I stopped taking antidepressants, I’d probably lose my mind” “I don’t even care about my mother anymore, I don’t even think about her.”

I touched upon some more difficult ideas to confront, my life-long eating disorder, my ambivalence about medication and mental health, and issues with the relationship I have (or do not have) with my mother. These and other justifications are too easy for me. I need to watch closely when engaging with myself or trying to convince others, because I am an expert at campaigning and spin. Clinically, we call this concept “positive reframing.” Alternatively, perhaps this concept of spin can be framed as highlighting multiple realities? I like to think the answer is contextual. [← Is this positive reframing? Living in integrity? See what I did again? I just tried to “spin” spin and then reframe it as potentially a positive reframing or living in integrity, versus calling myself a liar, which was my initial instinct. I cannot be stopped.]

Justifying my actions seems to increase when my denial-self thinks my wise-self may expose that I have to make a difficult decision, such as ending a relationship that is dangerous or unhealthy. For example, when I started my dissertation, I was a few months into spending a lot of

time fantasizing about and flirting with a prior lover, Z. Though I would deny it (and fully believe that denial) at the time, I had been using this long distance flirtation to help distract me from the agony of my recent losses (divorce, Covid, etc.). I was preoccupied with him, obsessed with the idea that he was the only human being on earth who could help me explore my sexuality and whom I could trust (this is a double dishonesty given our intensely turbulent relationship history). I spent hours every day sexting with him and plotting ways to fly across the country to visit him so we could have wild, dirty sex. He had been engaging with me virtually, but refusing to commit to an in person meeting, which made me all the more obsessed, pushy, and in denial. The next justifications for unhealthy, unethical behavior from my transparency list were crucial for me to expose before I acted in ways that I would regret:

September 14, 2020 cont., “Having sex with Z even though he’s married with children is ok, it’s different than regular adultery, because I’m practicing polyamory and we have a psycho-spiritual connection. It’s cosmic.” “I had him first.” “He’s going to have to live with the consequences, not me.” “I trust that because [he and his wife] had an open relationship once, that counts now.” “I’m not going to fall back in love with him if I have sex with him. I already love him.” “I’m definitely not a mistress in this” or alternately, telling him ‘I will not be your mistress’” “I’m going to turn off my phone for the whole day and not talk to anybody but myself” (8:04am) *What justifications have you used with yourself recently? How did these ideas serve you? How did they not serve you?*

Instead of (sticking with) shaming myself, recognizing my actions and motivations when I was not living in integrity allowed me to be curious about what came up. Then I would explore and work with what I discovered—emotionally and in relation to my socialization—when facing or sharing my (ever evolving) truth. My discoveries led me to (re)consider: How can I trust myself

if I continue to behave in ways that are untrustworthy? If I sacrifice myself for others? Or if I reject, dismiss or ignore myself?

Let's start with confronting how I sacrificed myself, which I will reframe as claiming my body, what it looks like, what I want to do with it, when and how. This is highly aligned with the interpersonal struggles related to sexual encounters explored in the next section, but early on in my work, I also decided I needed to apply this to my self-care and grooming:

September 10, 2020-D, I'm on my walk, musing about Z and sex. [Earlier] in the shower: I was taking care of some hair business on my thighs and around my vulva. I was imagining how Z would respond to this hair and that I'd have to get rid of it. I also noticed an ingrown hair and thought "well, I shouldn't do it until I have definitive plans to see Z so I don't get more ingrown hair." And as I was musing about that I was realizing, 'wtf? This is my body. I will keep it the way that I like it and how I want it. Nobody gets to have any part of this body the way they want it unless I want it too. I don't dress up or groom my body for someone else; just so I won't be judged or turn them off.' After some trimming to what feels comfortable to me, what I enjoy, I happily put down my trimmer. I'm fine with everything the way it is.

If I was going to trust myself, I needed to be sure that I would choose me, that I would do things for me first, that I would not live, act, or change myself to please someone else first. Even though I wasn't "fine with everything the way it is" I did take action aligned with my values (including letting my underarm hair grow) and this claiming of body hair that other people may see was a key step towards acceptance and trust in myself.

September 10, 2020-D cont., [...after my shower] I went to my drawer to get dressed and saw my new bras and thought about A suggesting that maybe I buy a few new bras or

lingerie to turn him on. And me jumping at that as a solution I could implement [to get him to notice or engage with me sexually]! Jumping online and buying new bras and underwear hoping it might turn him on. When I remembered this I was so fucking pissed off, I was like you motherfucker, that's just sick, put it on me as if I'm not sexy enough, as if my lingerie is the thing that can turn you on without ever asking me what would turn me on. Never again.

Recognizing how I had sublimated myself and allowed myself to be objectified in my marriage as a means of trying to get my needs met was another critical turning point for me in reclaiming my body. Yes, I was angry at my ex-husband, but more importantly from an empowerment standpoint, I could see how I was complicit in the situation and I was committed to not repeating that self-objectification.

Next, there is the issue of no longer dismissing or ignoring myself; but what does that mean exactly? Just hearing my thoughts? Applying or changing according to them? Which thoughts should be listened to and when? How will I know that my thoughts are true wisdom versus justifications, shape-shifting, or my anxiety seeking to gather evidence? My "logical" mind would often try to think and pep talk my way out of my experience, and my logic was compelling...

March 31, 2021: I know I've said this before but it bears repeating. Knowing is not being. I have always been convinced, likely through socialization, schooling etc., that once you know something you can apply it and it's yours. I truly believe(d) that once I deeply know something, feel something, believe in something, it's now a part of me and will affect my actions, behavior, thoughts, etc. We all know how ridiculous this is—at least I assume therapists get this intrinsically, if not explicitly.

Being in the woods at Panthera this morning, I'm reminded of this lesson again and again. When I'm here, I live in the now for the most part, I'm present, I'm not worrying about the future or the past, I feel secure and held. And I think I should be able to take this with me, this calm and this broader perspective, this feeling of connection, connectivity, grounding us ... I feel like I've been practicing this every day, so where does it go at night? Or other times when I doubt myself or the world? When I spin into whatever the fuck it is I spin into: despair, self-absorption, past/future anxiety.

I guess what I'm saying is that, this [Being] isn't a lesson learned, this isn't a quick fix, you can't just know it and boom, you're "cured" or apply it until you "fix" something, it's a practice, it's every day. It's re-grounding again and again. I suppose that's what they are referring to with meditation [mindfulness]. And in the West we act like "OK if you just do this thing you'll be better," it's not true, not in my case at least, you feel the benefit as you're doing it, but when we stop doing it, we go back to monkey mind. Maybe not immediately but soon enough.

I mean, all of this sounds right on, but the mind is wily. I had these moments of clarity a million times before, knowing and saying it was not the same as living it. See exhibit A written one year almost to the day prior to the above "realization":

March 30, 2020, Figuring something out is just agreeing with yourself on meaning, it's not actually a truth. So stop taking it so seriously! There is no real knowing, there is no truth, there's just being and doing. Deciding on related meaning is just a process, it's not a truth. It's just anxiety or the illusion of control trying to "make sense" to calm related fear. The brain (and society) is setting you up, don't get caught in that trap. If you choose to allow yourself to embrace the meaning you make, that's fine if it helps alleviate

anxiety. However, you need to be prepared for this “meaning” and “reality” to change and change often. Otherwise, you’re setting yourself up even more. Nothing is permanent. We can’t really know anything, because that knowing is not “the now”, it is only about making sense of the past or the fantasy of a future.

This note in particular, succinctly outlines my “learning” from 6 months of intense work; just like my letter to myself, I “knew” these things, and I “knew” I “knew” these things, but I was not Being them. Instead of listening and applying (Being), I went over and over these ideas with myself and with others, with no effect on my behavior and, after an initial calming, little ongoing effect on decreasing my anxiety.

Trying to avoid how I felt was already causing me pain—but if I stopped trying to change how I felt, I worried that in addition to feeling the feelings, I would [fill in catastrophic thinking regarding getting stuck in pain, breaking and needing help, pushing people away due to neediness, making poor decisions, embarrassing myself, etc.].

Self-Acceptance: Working with Parts

Thinking versus Intuition, Emotional Response, and Being. When it comes to identity, as long as I am acting like a nonhuman animal, I feel I am safe and living in integrity. During these times, especially in the woods, I can feel joy, and admire myself, my accomplishments, and the positive aspects of life. Oftentimes in the woods (after I met M), I would talk to myself like I was my ideal best friend, reminding myself that I was always there to listen. I would celebrate things like how much I was enjoying sex and feeling satisfied with my body and my relationship, I would go into detail about an exciting sexual adventure or explore deeply how intense and wonderful it felt to feel safe with myself and in love.

I loved focusing on emotions and aspects of my life that brought me joy and feelings of

accomplishment, but felt sharing these exciting discoveries with others could be challenging. It felt as if the only things that are socially acceptable for women to focus on are problem solving or complaining about relationship issues, our bodies, aging, health, or misfortunes. If I do share a success with others it is only briefly, and often marked by deflection and even dismissal (“Yes, I guess I did [accomplish something extraordinary], but look at me being self congratulatory! Tell me what’s happening with your kids these days?”). This phenomenon feels connected to self-objectifying and remaining in the role of passive victim; as if it is only acceptable for women to feel happiness and pride indirectly and based on gender specific norms, such as through their children or spouses, or things like weight loss or domestic achievements (gardens, homes, etc.). Even my most “paid work” successful women friends rarely talk about their job successes, and if they do, it is brief compared to other discussions. This is reinforced by how women are portrayed in film and other media, one need look no further than the Bechdel test phenomenon to see how limiting the portrayal of women is in society (see Bouchat, 2019). Incidentally, reading this again I am reminded about how silent I became over the course of my dissertation experiment. Given my inability to engage in small talk, and my commitment to not focus on oppressive norms, and thus not discussing my variety of insecurities (i.e., my ex-husband, feeling fat or old, or domestic achievements), I was left with my excitement over my fantastic sex life, other achievements and discoveries, or the deep dark misery of my attachment wounds. People in my life did not seem to know how to/or were not interested in engaging in related conversations, aside from my friend JT who would talk to me about relationship terror for hours. I did struggle with sharing my ongoing relationship insecurity with JT as it did feel like it was aligned with oppressive norms, but I simply could not stop myself.

When it comes to emotion, perhaps especially emotion outside of gender norms, when is

it ok to feel and share joy and abandon? If I do not want to be a stereotype, should I focus more on thinking versus emotion and relationships, or is making this switch supporting male privilege? Debating this was all mental masturbation. Fact of the matter was, I did not have much of a choice; given my socialization and cultural upbringing, I rejected my emotions and thus had a tendency to revert to “thinking,” which, the more I witnessed it, tended to be skewed and unreliable.

November 25, 2020, ...after listening to my new song *Howl in the Deep*: “abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you’re asleep” [based on a journey, see Appendix C] I was talking about how for years I used the password ‘stay awake’ as a daily reminder to stay conscious, to not fall back asleep like I always had—where I suddenly woke up and realized I was in a fantasy. Stay awake, stay awake! I would say that to myself all the time! But I never did stay awake! I would see these passwords (they were followed by the year), and think ‘how come I wasn’t awake? I kept telling myself to be awake! And yet I was asleep!’ And what I realized is that I thought staying awake and conscious meant staying awake in your conscious mind. I think what I learned from that journey was that staying awake is actually in your body and your intuition, not in your mind. Because you can’t trust your mind. Staying awake means staying in the now and present and engaged. I think it means staying out of your mind, your analysis, your thinking, and staying in your experience.

I “knew” that “being wild” was what was needed to be healthy, but I struggled a lot with living through my senses, intuition, and emotion. Automatically falling back on my “logical” mind: going into analysis, questioning everything, always searching for the why, judging as “good” or “bad,” was exhausting and started to seem less like a comfort and more like a defense or

distraction from Being, feeling, and experiencing. If that distraction failed, my socialization would reinforce that I definitely should not trust my intuition or emotions...

December 15, 2020, Not in the woods, on the couch in the evening. Thinking about how I've been wired to fear things and "know," to control; thinking about how I was systematically taken away from my senses and my intuition either by external rules or by fighting those rules. And by trauma. Taught on so many levels and so many ways to not trust my body, to not trust my feelings, to not trust my beliefs, to not trust anything other than concepts, ideas, logic, rules. All those things are in the mind and all those things in the mind hurt. And they're tricksters. They are figments of our imagination, they are meaning making, they could be anything, there is no fact. In science you have peer review, that's just a bunch of other scientists thinking in similar ways, why is that more reliable than nature? It is not!

Talking to C [a woman I had a flirtation with] tonight on Marco Polo I said, I'm going to relearn—scratch that—I'm going to strip things away and learn to trust my body again, learn to trust my feelings again, learn to embrace my intuition and my body state so that I can make informed decisions. In order to do that I have to try things, I have to do things that in my mind I think are uncomfortable, or somehow unsafe.

If things are obviously unsafe I'm not going to do them, but security is a whole other thing. I need to find my security and myself. I need to find my confidence in myself and I will do that through experimentation, and through listening, through being, through witnessing, through moving, feeling my way through using my body and my senses. I will work to integrate all my senses

This experimenting, and basing my "truth" not just on what I tell myself, but also what I

experience, feel, and intuit, was and continues to be my call to action. Essentially, even though I justify and defend my personal truths, I deeply believe the concept of “fact” is a social construct. Again, I start to wonder why logic is seen as more reliable than feelings: because it is considered a masculine trait and feelings are considered feminine? Because it is privileged? Because it can be used to oppress others? This is not acceptable to me; feeling is a wondrous experience, and feelings can also provide important information to be considered. At the same time, feelings, especially ones like I have, could be really, really embarrassing and discrediting if shown to others!

March 16, 2021, Panthera 8:13 AM it's about 17° out, last night I was struggling a lot with working with emotion. I have so many different emotions all the time. And I started thinking about how in society there's a lot of conversation about managing your emotions. And I started thinking about how my emotion doesn't always seem to be a guide to something, it just seems like it's waves and storms and showers and trickles. It's all over the place, but I guess it's all water.

Anyway, I was trying to think through how to work with this kind of emotional roller coaster all the time. It's embarrassing in a lot of ways, because after the emotion I feel like I've said too much, or that I'm different afterwards [which makes me seem unreliable]. [When I'm in it] the emotion feels like it's all of me and like it defines me, and then when it's gone I feel like I'm back to myself and somehow different. So then I'm embarrassed that I showed this other part that doesn't *fully* represent how I view the world.

So I guess it's like [I assume] when I'm logical I can count on logic, trust it, but when I'm emotional I can't. But logic can change over time and opinions can change

over time so why can't emotions? It's all information right? Just like logic, you try things on and let them go when they don't actually work or make sense, I guess the same can be said about feelings right? So why is it so different? Is it because I'm socialized as a woman? Is it because feelings are so often demonized or belittled?

You can't always rely upon facts. There's also feelings involved and there's misinformation right? So I'm wondering how I can work with my feelings in that way too, where sometimes I can stick with their "logic" and trust them and other times I can just see them as information that I've tried on but it turns out doesn't fit.

No matter how much I tried to use logic to calm myself (like in this case when I was using logic to calm my anxiety about feelings) my logical mind worried. It worried and worried and pretended this was productive, meanwhile calling my true feelings and intuition into question. My mind would argue: my feelings seem to bring about shame and contradictions; versus thinking, which in many situations, seems highly effective. Still, if I was going to stay in a place of integrity, I could not just accept the idea of embracing my logic and emotions conceptually, I had to actively Be in them with others and see what happened.

The more I tuned into myself, the more I started to feel like I was in some sort of groundhog day loop. I struggled to accept that I was repeating myself over and over with very little changing ("she said I didn't see it, I should open my eyes, she said I couldn't see it, I'm always surprised" (Things are Beginning (at the End, Appendix C).

November 27, 2020, Another morning at Panthera everything is different and everything is the same. Nothing is different and nothing is the same. It's like this every day. It's never like this. It's the day after "Thanksgiving," I woke up insecure this morning. I don't know how else to say it, it isn't exactly sadness but I think there's some sadness. Mostly

it was just worry. Unnecessary worry. Nervousness about how I acted last night with M and his son. Insecurity around my personhood. I tried everything, I called on Roach, it just got gross, Roach went and found Mouse and then went to eat Mouse and like hundreds of roaches came out of Mouse. I guess that's reflective of how I was feeling. I went to Crow and she was dead. I went to Owl and I said "Owl, what would you be?" And Owl was like, "I am Being." Then I realized when I was in the woods again this morning that I was going about it all wrong. I was thinking about Owl and realized that I was looking for an outcome in Being, and Being is Being, that's the outcome, that's the practice. If I'm looking to change how I feel, I'm missing the point.

I asked the animals for help figuring out how to Be (see what I did there? I had been trying to use my mind to "figure out how" to Be, which is definitely the wrong tool), but animals naturally Be. Their example of Being implied I just needed to trust what is, but I was not even close to ready. I would distract myself from feeling through coming up with "wise" insights that felt transformative and exciting, and I would want to stay with that high. Every time I would find an insight or "knowing," denial would suggest I was integrating it into my reality, but I was certainly not Being what I "knew." I was good at knowing and thinking, I have a sharp mind and a lot of practice analyzing. Yet Being, especially interpersonally, required self-acceptance, confidence, and self-trust, and despite trying again and again through the ever present loop, I could not think my way into those states.

To better understand (and thus hopefully change) what I was experiencing in this loop (using my mind to address my emotions again!), I mapped out my emotional process (see Figure 1: Identity Development and Self-Attachment Process—Emotional Response/Experience in Appendix A). I found that my emotional process in reaction to attempts at Being *in trust* with an

attachment figure had some consistent processes, although it was not linear. For example, I would start with the experience of feeling trust with myself, M, or the woods. From there I would either feel fear and anxiety or love (or often all at once!). This would then follow a variety of different paths. For instance, on a short loop that was purely emotional (versus interpersonal or focused on other), if I just felt fear/anxiety, I would self-soothe and then loop back into love, which would then either double back to trust, or enhance a feeling of clarity and empowerment, which would then return to Being in trust. I needed practice to develop that trust, yet at every chance, I would distract myself from feeling by interrupting my feelings to analyze or think about the concept of feeling, etc.:

November 27, 2020 cont. It feels like this sorrow is necessary for all the joy I have. It feels like there's no need to change how I'm feeling, I should just feel it. There's no need to analyze how I'm feeling or "figure it out," there's nothing to figure out. That's just an attempt for me to control it ... I'm feeling melancholy. It's not sad. Even if I was sad, I'd be fine, but I don't know, I kind of feel like crying a little bit? Here I am analyzing again, that's what I've been doing for the past five minutes after seeing such epic beauty [at the top of Panthera]. I was saying ... [10 reasons why I may be sad]

Except there's the woods. And me. I'm right here. So I guess my closest friend is right here. And I guess I need to be with myself a bit more. I'm going to go back to Being right now in the woods and I'm going to clear my mind because all of these words and meanings and meaning-making it's just nonsense. I'm going to feel whatever I'm feeling. And Be whatever I'm Being.

A longer emotional loop might be feeling fear/anxiety, attempting to self-soothe and failing, resulting in more thinking anxiety, then these paranoid thoughts might lead me to attempt to

sabotage the initial trust or to flee; once I recognized my actions I would then go back to self-soothing and so on. These feeling states would repeat with, what seemed to be at the time, little variation and no real discernable way to anticipate which direction things might go. And even that observation is another trap—what would “anticipating which direction things might go” have accomplished? More knowing? So what? You see, what *felt* like logic and reason, was (is) actually often anxiety.

Sometimes (often) even the subsequent clarity and feelings of empowerment from analysis were not useful. In fact, logic and reason contributed very little to my transformation process, rather, they hindered the process by deflecting and distracting me from experience and experimentation. One thing that is clear in hindsight, when I fall back on my socialization and seek to prioritize or take care of others first, associated anxiety thinking related to relationship puts me into a state of confusion, and almost surely leads to an extended painful loop. *Have you ever tracked your emotional process? Where do you get stuck? Is this serving you?*

“Knowing” where I get stuck *may* help me prioritize working on experimenting and experiencing my way through living in integrity and releasing my socialization so I can circle back to Being. Being may seem like an obvious, simple solution, but it is often far from easy. It certainly was challenging when engaging interpersonally *and* when trying to develop and then maintain a cohesive identity *and* seeking to develop a secure attachment to myself. I was convinced I needed to Be, in full acceptance of myself, my feelings, my experience—but this new way of Being seemed so counterintuitive. Surely feeling my (I assumed overwhelming) feelings is more dangerous than fixing what was “wrong” (through thinking) or distracting myself so I could “do” what I was “supposed to be doing instead,” right?

To break this pattern, I decided (again) I needed to develop self-acceptance, trust, and

confidence in myself through curiosity and experimentation. However, (my “logical” mind would pipe in) based on attachment theory, to increase exploration, you need a secure base! My “logical” mind would then argue I was trapped in another loop—I needed to experiment to build confidence, trust, and self-acceptance, yet I needed a secure base to experiment. To try to get out of this thinking/anxiety loop, I pushed myself to do the opposite—feel and intuit more. I was especially convinced that similar to fear and pain, when you avoid emotion, you basically attach to it, counterintuitively making it last longer and feel worse:

November 16, 2020, Talking to ND at “the secret place” [nearby privately owned forest that few people know about] today about flow and remembering about how when you avoid things like sorrow it reinforces it, as we know. But also that when you’re in sorrow... when you invite it and it flows through, you sort of miss it a little bit when it’s gone. Or like when you want to cry and you can’t access those feelings ... you want them back, you want to be able to feel them. And that’s a good thing to remember when we’re fighting it, that I want it on a lot of levels and it feels good. Also, saying you don’t want to cry, or shouldn’t cry, it’s like saying that you shouldn’t sneeze.

Here I suggest that not only would it benefit me to allow emotions to flow through me when I am feeling them, maybe I could be grateful for them, because I actually appreciate that sort of deep feeling.

I “knew” I covet the experience of living through feeling and intuition, it is actually aligned with my temperament and thus comes naturally for me. I also believed doing so would not only increase experimentation but was also necessary for building a cohesive identity. Still, I struggled to accept my emotional lability, which was exacerbated by experimentation! In the next excerpt, I am in “teacher” mode, so it is more intellectual and prone to denial and contradiction:

February 22, 2021, Another thing [A and I] talked about was that he said “I don’t trust myself” and I said that I fundamentally understood that, that there are parts of myself I wasn’t trusting either, and now—and what’s happened is that I have these deep emotions, these deep swells of emotions, and instead of suppressing them or judging them or trying to intellectualize them or figure them out, I let myself feel them.

I don’t make big decisions based on them, because then I definitely wouldn’t be trustworthy. But in general I am trustworthy as long as I don’t let myself be fully swayed by my emotional experience. However, I do take it into consideration! I do think it’s important information, and I think oftentimes it’s the most important information, and that then I need to use my logic and knowledge to sort through it and then put a plan in place. This is where executive function comes in, which is very important, but it’s a tool, it’s not the leader.

In one breath I say I let myself feel my feelings, and in the next breath I explain how I use my executive function to analyze my feelings! When should I listen to my feelings? When should I soothe them? When should I just feel the feels? When should I trust my feelings and when is it “better” to go into thinking?

February 22, 2021, cont., So maybe it’s a Pisces thing, maybe it’s just me, but I am highly emotional, and that’s OK. So I do trust myself. I trust that I’m gonna have deep emotions and they’re going to be very real to me in the moment. And they deserve to be experienced and listened to and seen and comforted if necessary, but then they’re going to pass. So I shouldn’t make decisions or do anything rash in the midst of a big emotional upheaval. This is the [most obvious] thing in the world, but it’s what I just figured out. I think yesterday, I finally put it all together... This is how the parts work together. And the

parts that seem to sometimes get in the way, I need to figure out if those are just old wiring or if there is some truth in them, right?

So is it just that I'm recognizing a pattern and that fear comes in—I mean anxiety comes in—and then I need to quiet that anxiety? So that I can get back to the business of feeling, intuition, creativity and then executive function? ... And when you project into the future what will I do if XYZ happens...? That's a waste right? Because it's so far off it doesn't even matter. That's just a distraction. That's the executive function working with anxiety to stay stuck.

See what I did there? I went from feeling to thinking about feeling and tricked myself again! I express a similar process below, except I tried to justify it too! The mind! Wily indeed.

February 22, 2021, cont., The mind is so wily, it has all these ways to distract you from just feeling, processing your feelings, and then making related decisions and [taking right] action ... but there's something about processing the emotional reaction and listening to it that feels important, and dividing or separating that emotional experience and intuition from anxiety and mind tricks... So I'm gonna practice that with myself now.

Perhaps it is that I deny the feelings. That no matter how many times I say I welcome them and—I'm really not doing that, maybe it's not that extreme, I'm smiling... It all comes down to this: Being right? My emotions are a dog in the woods, and I am the parent. Sometimes they need to be let off the leash and sometimes I want them close to me because it's not safe for them to run around . . . And if I'm secure then I accept all my parts and if I accept all my parts, they work together as they should and I live consciously, when I live consciously I can be myself, and find myself, I'm authentic; when I'm authentic and secure, I can maintain my authenticity and I can be at one with

myself and with others.

I “discover” more “wise” insights that feel great, until I test things and engage in this new way, and then I’m straight back into the thinking/anxiety loop.

Discernment and Right Action. When I could not just Be, I would still work to witness and experience what I was doing in the present moment. If I was successful, I could use discernment and make a decision on if feeling or thinking was serving me or if other action was needed. Discernment helped me utilize thinking and feeling as tools to *do*, one part of a system that can allow me to Be (live in alignment with myself beyond my socialization) and then take “right action,” which is action based on need, versus in reaction to fear or anxiety or blindly trusting my mind or my emotional response. On this day, I decided I had the power to just decide to accept and engage with my emotions in a positive, healthy way:

November 24, 2020, ...Walking up the back road of Panthera, early in the morning, it’s now 6:36, I was likening emotions to the rising sun, and also to temperature changes. We were walking at around 6:15 and it was pretty dark, and then literally within one minute, it’s light out. Like the snap of the fingers. I need to be paying more attention. But my point is, emotions are like that, they’re dark and shady and shadowy, and then suddenly they’re not. Remembering this, that they change so quickly, I think this is what can help us embrace them, so they flow through us.

Walking up the mountain, I was looking at my legs, they’re so shapely? Slim? Strong maybe?... And I felt so proud of myself, like not just because they look good but because I’m strong, because I did this through hiking, through daily practice, not just walking my dog but also being present in the woods, doing this dissertation, listening, experiencing. It’s good to see that I can do it. And I can be consistent. And that being

consistent in this way it's bringing me positive results, not just in my body obviously! I mean that's the least of it I guess really.

When I accept my emotions from a grounded, creative, *and* logical place, I can tolerate *and* celebrate them. This led to me being more positive about my body as well. Ultimately, I just needed to live in alignment like Owl, easy! Except unfortunately, there was that small matter of my difficulty with discernment in general, and specifically concerning right action (what do I need at this moment? I don't know!). I did not have reliable guideposts to help decide when to Do or Think or Feel let alone when to Be or what I needed. Or did I?

September 8, 2020, ... looking at Owl I think, part of effortless power is not spending effort on things that don't bring you rewards. You don't go after the same [uncatchable] prey over and over again and miss over and over again and then keep doing it right?

I can be relentless, even when it is repeatedly proven that I cannot have what I think I want. Owl told me to not waste my energy; if it is not paying off, switch tactics.

September 11, 2020 ... Here I am in the woods and I [was obsessing about relationships] and I kept bringing myself back to the moment, back to me, and I started thinking about Owl. And like "what would Owl do?" and Owl would look [for prey] when she was hungry and then she'd go after what she wanted. If she missed, she would be OK because there's going to be a next one, and that's what it's about here I think. Not to get attached.

And then I thought, "well, what is she attached to? Survival. She needs to eat."

And so I thought "well I need to figure out what my food is, what my survival is." Stop trying to force things to happen. To hunt, you swoop, you reach, and sometimes you miss and sometimes you catch. So be careful what you go after, because you take what you catch. Don't waste your energy on things that aren't worth catching. And I guess I just

need to figure out, aside from myself, who is infinitely worth catching ... Also, you, self, you belong to me. You cannot attach to other because you are mine.

This excerpt illustrates how I constructed meaning-making from the animals. Eventually, I came to the idea that like Owl, discernment concerning “right action” is efficiently doing what serves me. If I apply Owl wisdom to myself, I ask: how can that serve me? How is what I am doing not in alignment with my best interests and what steps must I take to fix that?

February 22, 2021, If I am in alignment with myself I can take ‘right action’. If I can ...take ‘right action’ to serve myself, I am able to then serve others. I’m able to consciously make sound, compassionate decisions. And I don’t try to control others. They are also free to make their own decisions and do not need to be influenced by me because my safety is not dependent upon others. This makes it so that I can live peacefully in the world, alleviate unnecessary suffering for myself and I’m also helping others or I’m able to help others to find this place of Being so they too can alleviate unnecessary suffering in their lives and in the world. I accept it as is. I can decide how I feel about it and if I wanna do anything about it. And sometimes I’ll be able to do stuff and sometimes I won’t but either way I need to focus that on myself. And then I’m free and I’m empowered and I am living in love. This is the practice. This is the way of life. Specifically, if falling back on my socialization left me in a state of confusion and the thinking/anxiety loop, focusing on what directly serves me can make discernment a much easier and straight forward process. This is so obvious in hindsight! I mean, it feels like I *just this moment* figured this out; but did I? Or is this just a very challenging thing to remember and do?

Self-Acceptance and Shadow Parts. A critical component of discernment and right action was, as noted above, the idea of living in alignment, like Owl. Living in alignment, I

argued, meant full self-acceptance and integration of my shadow parts so I can become cohesive and “whole”:

February 22, 2021 cont., If I live according to these principles [Being, right action, self-acceptance, wholeness] I’m not judging others. The social construct becomes irrelevant other than meeting it and understanding it and not living according to it or bowing to it. This is also a political act. Because if I am being true to myself and serving myself that is against what society says a woman should be doing.

But also society talks a lot about selfishness and self-centeredness and that these things are bad and wrong and I think that they’re really missing the point. I think that if you are doing what serves you, you then have the capacity to serve others. Versus something like trying to help others because it makes you feel good. And that gets really convoluted and controlling doesn’t it? It also becomes judgemental, or patronizing, and you’re depleting yourself and thus living in scarcity. Then hoarding resources.

It’s also a political act because it’s accepting all the parts that are shamed and rejected by society, and then finding their purposes. An essential question is always, does this serve me? Think of how the world will change. Am I doing this from a place of love and my authentic self or am I doing this from anxiety, scarcity, obligation?

I was suggesting that not only did I need to allow myself to trust my discernment and take “right action” in a self-serving way, I also needed to accept that I am, for instance, selfish and self-centered. Sure, when I reframe it as I did above, it is not so hard to accept, but what about when faced with having to Be selfish and self-centered, especially when engaging with others who view the world differently? This brings me back to the idea of personal responsibility and empowerment versus denial and projection. *If I take right action, I am being conscious, taking*

personal responsibility, and then I feel empowered. When I ignore my perspective and do not prioritize myself, I am more likely to suppress my feelings and experience, feel victimized and project my denied parts onto others. How about you?

Therefore, in order to accept my whole self, I need to be conscious. If I live consciously and accept all of my parts, then I will need to take right action. While taking right action will likely directly serve me, it can also be challenging.

February 22, 2021, [Recalling talking to A about divorce] ... “[the combination of my denial and you not communicating that you saw it coming] is why I felt like you were lying to me. It was my worst nightmare, my biggest fear for my ego came true: that I would miss something huge! I’m always so hypervigilant, and somehow I didn’t notice that we were going to get divorced? Like it literally took me 100% by surprise? I just figured we would work harder, or when I think about it, [I figured eventually] that you would change...”

... but I guess he knew he wasn’t going to change. And I am just forever optimistic; I think anything can happen. He doesn’t. He’s used to being caught. I’m used to fighting for my life.

You can see some of my projection here. While talking about my past denial, I am actively disowning my feelings of victimhood and projecting them onto him; *he* was the one that needed to change while *I* was just forever optimistic. *He* is the coward that always gives up and *I* am the valiant fighter...

February 22, 2021, cont., ... but anyway, it [the divorce] surprised me, it seemed really quick, because I hadn’t considered it and then I was doing it. But maybe that’s how my decision making works anyway. In all that fighting, I just didn’t consider that it wouldn’t

work. If I had even considered *once* that I couldn't fix it, I would've known for years that this marriage was not gonna last ... If I'd been living consciously, I wouldn't have been able to live consciously in that marriage. Because I was very unhappy. And I needed things to be different. I needed to be met and I was with somebody that couldn't meet me. So if I had been living consciously I would've seen that it wasn't going to happen. I would've seen how he was training me. I would've seen the dependency on me and how that was serving me and how that wasn't serving me. And I would've had to end things.

And at the time I wasn't ready. But now when I think about living consciously I think, sure it feels more challenging at times, but at least it lives in some form of reality. At least I'm not fooling myself and living in a dreamworld. I have power when I am conscious, at least the power to decide what I want to do about something. I'm not a victim when I live consciously. I can make conscious decisions and sometimes things are hard or uncomfortable or I don't like them but then I can make a decision on what I want to do with them. When I'm not living consciously it's like I have no choice. There just has to be some middle ground so I can maintain hope and optimism and not make split decisions based on incomplete data, but at the same time recognize when enough is enough. And I do think that that's communication also.

Here I am continuing to positively reframe things so I look like the "good" one. I am on one of my "wise insight" kicks, and I am feeling empowered; which is great, except I am not owning my part of the dynamic. By projecting things onto him instead of owning my shadow parts, I am setting myself up to repeat this pattern with others. Luckily, when I say things out loud, I cannot hide from myself, which leads to personal responsibility. It also leads to healing; I can externalize the pain that lives inside of me and work with it instead of suffering under the quiet

shame of it. In this case, I eventually got *close* to acknowledging that I was projecting, though I still maintained my hero identity:

February 22, 2021 cont., ... But of course A didn't 100% think he couldn't change... maybe he did but there's my [denial], I wouldn't have believed him even if he had said he couldn't do it; he probably did [tell me]. One thing I need to remember is the role he played in my life, he got to be the victim, and the weakling that couldn't do it. That meant that I never really felt that way. At least not consciously. I couldn't allow myself to feel that way around him because he had that covered. So I always felt so strong and capable and clear; so he [figuratively] provided me Valium and a scapegoat.

And now without him, I find other ways to self-soothe. And I look at my own parts that feel victimized or helpless or ineffectual. And I work on owning them and helping them along, instead of trying to help him along, and it's much more effective for me to notice those in myself and work with them, because I am capable and when it comes down to it I get it done. And I believe in myself. And that's not the case with him.

But I don't need that in my life. Because I'm not scared of my own parts.

I am owning many of my projections, but I am still upset with and projecting things onto, and thus disparaging, A ("because I am capable and when it comes down to it, I get it done"). Also, *telling myself* I am not scared of my parts is different than *Being* unafraid, and while I am trying to build confidence in both cases, it is still denial. Thus, the (continuing) journey towards trusting myself and having a cohesive identity, one where I accept and embrace *all* my parts, even the ones that my socialization has told me are disgusting, wrong, or dangerous, has been enlightening and terrifying.

March 30, 2021: 8:24 AM probably 29° we're at Panthera... The geese are back. They've

been returning for weeks, but they're back to patrolling the pond. So we couldn't stay very long. Magick is so into every smell. I was thinking yesterday about identity and my changeability...I am not dishonest exactly, but you can't really trust what I say. So I want to be taken very seriously, I want to be listened to, but then there's not a lot of weight behind what I'm saying sometimes, or at least there's weight at the time but then it changes. So how do you navigate this? ...

I [do] live according to my values even when they're aspirational, I don't want to hurt anybody and I'm careful to not hurt people, and I pay attention to negotiated rules. And by pay attention, I mean I follow them and then sometimes I want them to change, and I'll talk about them. And sometimes I break them and then I'll tell you.

I want freedom. It is a bit of a big ask isn't it? It requires a lot of trust. I'm not sure how to provide that to myself... Perhaps if I could just accept that I'm ever-changing, and that I'm doing the best with the information that I have, and that it's real when it's happening, then I can accept my life in motion, in river motion. And I can let go because I can trust that the universe will catch me and also that I'm a good person who just happens to be very changeable and that's exciting and interesting and sometimes scary. But whenever I worry that I'm stuck or I don't like how things are, the direction they're going, I should remember this, that I'm always changing and then I'm always adapting.

Practicing with attachment is essential to live like this ... I also have to accept that other people are going to change too. Regardless of what they say or how they act. Other people can't be steady for me all the time so that I can be all over the place. That's not a nice way of saying but, you know...

This idea of accepting myself as a changeable person, that my identity is that I am a person that “changes,” was complicated. On the one hand, it helped me own a rejected part, not attach to things, and embrace my power, which includes my adaptability and ever changing identity:

November 10, 2020, corresponding with [a friend] this am. He's stuck and trying to figure out who he wants to be, where he wants to work, how he can release and save his soul from the hell that he's in. I'm thinking about those feelings of helplessness, of being trapped, of the fear of the unknown or not having “security” how that ... makes you feel victimized. And I'm thinking about telling 37-year-old Rachel (10 years ago), this is what is going to happen: You're going to lose 2 fiancés and another husband, you're going to move out of Cambridge. You're going to have your identity stripped or more likely you're going to shed your identity at least three times. You're no longer going to have a sick identity, you're no longer going to have an executive identity, you're no longer going to have a city girl identity, you're no longer going to have a married woman identity, you're barely going to have a daughter identity, you're going to be Rachel.

And if you could just accept yourself, your life will be better. But you won't be able to do that, 37-year-old Rachel, you're going to fight and fight and fight and think that your fighting is a virtue. And eventually you're going to fight yourself nearly to death. You're going to resist and fight until you feel like you're going to die. Like you're going to throw yourself down the stairs or step into the road. It's going to be painful. you're going to want to die a couple times. you're going to be close to that a couple times.

But in the end, which is just the beginning, you're going to recognize that control is an illusion, that fear is an illusion, and that pain is an illusion. You're going to crave

and then become fascinated by and then lose your fear of fire [your own power], after being burned again and again and again and being confused by it, after feeling hurt and victimized by it. Denying it, stifling it, drenching it with anxiety.

You're going to end that life and start another. You're going to realize that fire needs air, it needs kindling, and needs space; that it needs tending but not too close. Fire is destructive and beautiful, it clears the way for new growth. You're going to stop worrying about how your fire can hurt other people, and stop worrying about how other people's fire can hurt you. You're going to stop running from it. You're going to see it for what it is, hot, cleansing, making way for new growth, enriching the soil. And then soon after, you'll join with it, you will join with your own fire. And recognize you are a dragon and you can "control" or better, own, embrace your own fire. And you will use it often. And without fear.

Sometimes you're going to get burned and sometimes you're going to burn others, you're not always going to use it responsibly, it's not always going to go where you think it's going to go or burn for as long or as little as you think it will... Sometimes you're going to warm your hands by it and sometimes you're going to watch as everything burns down with joy and sorrow and in anticipation...

I am imagining 37-year old Rachel's reaction to this, which would have been utter disbelief, dismissal, disparaging, and alcohol. Incidentally, I believe the concept of fire here is a metaphor for love. Anyway, my point is, I cannot avoid pain, I cannot anticipate how or when I am going to change or where a relationship is going to go, and remembering that can help stop my mind from pretending I can control things. It can disrupt the illusion that planning results in anything other than a plan. I am reminding myself that leaving the present and attaching to any future

fantasy is a painful and debilitating waste of time. The practice is that when I stop fighting to hold onto what I think I want and Be, doors open, change happens, and when it does, if I do not judge or fight it, I can adapt and expand, and thus be powerful and free.

On the other hand, if I accept that I am changeable I have to accept that other people will also change, and my anxiety does not like that one bit. Also, living in a world where positivism is still practiced, where people value dependability, resolve, and “facts” (considered “masculine” traits) makes it difficult to accept changeability as a core aspect of my being. Still, I was convinced I needed to accept my whole self, and to do that, I felt I had to embrace Being and thus multiple realities (e.g., non-attachment leads to freedom, and acceptance also tends to increase my anxiety). Is this another justification? Spin? A logic loop? A wise insight? Truth? Distraction? An example of self-acceptance? In response to my logical mind I say: Yes.

Self-Regulation Versus External Regulation. My dogged focus on other people and relationships not only got in the way of my discernment and “right action,” it also failed to get me what I believed I needed from external sources (e.g., validation, acceptance, and grounding). I was convinced I needed to push myself to maintain my self-focus, and to do this I needed to stop looking to others for help and work on self-regulation.

Right around the time of the below excerpt, my partner M and I are feeling enormous joy and closeness, but at the same time I was feeling deep sadness. This confounded M—and, I just realized (i.e., I just made up), caused his anxiety to increase, adding tension to our relationship, which in turn caused my anxiety to increase (or perhaps surface). It also confused me—I was so happy! Why was I crying so much? Is something wrong with this relationship? Or should I just stifle my sadness so I do not confuse him? I worked through the experience in therapy...

March 19, 2021: just had a session with FJ [therapist] and feeling really clear. I have been

feeling a lot of sadness and attaching myself to the narrative associated with relationship sadness. I believe that this is one way that I avoid actually feeling. When I breathe into the sadness and drop the narrative, I remember that when I live in the now, when I am Being, sadness must be part of it because there is a lot of sadness around me and inside of me. The world is sad in so many ways. So I can be joyful in the now but I also can't deny that sadness also exists.

Initially I was trying to stifle, and thus attached to my narrative around sadness, by looking for problems in my relationship. Then comes that rascal "thinking" again, distracting me from relational challenges by providing me insight about narratives, presumably to lessen my anxiety about M's confusion and to bring me back to Being. My logical mind ultimately seems helpful as I uncover how my emotional regulation strategies are undermining me in a variety of ways, though again the ultimate answer is Being...

March 19, 2021 cont., ... I have been seeking equilibrium outside of myself through relationship with others. But by doing that I then surrender my power to others and how they may react or respond to me. That keeps me in a helpless place. Or I go into hyper-controlling. But I am a creature of water, I must surrender, but do so with discernment. To be in the river you have to surrender but you also need to navigate or be in engaged surrender as we have explored before. I practice engaged surrender often through art, the woods, doing therapy for instance.

It's OK to go into the darkness because I will come out the other side. I can and must center myself on my experience and if I'm emotional then so be it. That's the primary way that I engage in the world. And it's OK there. I am safe there. But I also need to work on skills for engaged surrender. Figuring out how to integrate discernment

into feelings. Yes, art, woods, therapy [accomplishes this] but also trusting myself in whatever emotion I'm in, being OK with it and not seeking external reinforcement or security. I have to surrender. And I'll come through the other side. And if I don't, that's OK too, bc I have art and the woods to ground me. I have been too far from these things lately and that is how I center myself. Today is for art.

I'm safe and ok in my feeling states and perhaps when I get really deep in them, that's when I need to disengage from others vs. seeking to engage to regulate. That may be my cue to ground vs. seeking external reassurance. Fucking a!!! Of course my first instinct is to tell everybody about this. But, what I need to do is have some breakfast and make some art.

In this case, I hypothesize that right action in response to my feelings is to meet them with engaged surrender, then center and care for myself, instead of seeking help from others. My old way of regulating through others' reactions is the opposite of empowerment and "right action." Instead, it keeps me in a loop where I redirect my focus to others, act according to their needs to get what I want, then I feel worse when I: (a) deny or disregard my experience to try to get a certain outcome (i.e., when I suppress my "big emotions" to not scare others away in the hopes that someone will care and thus ground me) and (b) when I do not get what I want, how I want it, or I feel that my partner is too focused on themselves and feel abandoned or hurt. Incidentally, this deflection and hence loss of power may also be why I get stuck in the thinking/anxiety loop.

In hindsight, I think focusing on others also may have been a way to give me permission to feel. In the example regarding my behavior potentially causing M to get anxious, which would lead eventually to me getting anxious, I cannot help but wonder if I was already anxious and needed his anxiety and the subsequent relational tension as an excuse to allow myself to feel.

This is something I have historically accused my partners of doing, and looking at it now it is all so confusing and seemingly obvious at the same time. Regardless, in this proposed new way of self-regulating, I am advocating that I trust myself and enter engaged surrender, which I conceptualize as like riding a horse or being in a river; you do not really have control, but you cannot just disengage or you are in danger.

October 26, 2020, Aging has changed my relationship to time; I am not in a rush much and I don't feel an obsessive need to plan and "know" I believe things will unfold, I know how long and how short a decade is. I could plan and plan but I would never have known what the next decade held. We're like mice on little leaves in a raging river, thinking that if we try hard enough, we can charter a path, but when in reality, all we can control is what we do with our bodies. How much we let go; how we move with the current; which way we face. Engaged surrender.

This is aligned with the November 10, 2020 excerpt above. Conceptually, engaged surrender makes perfect sense, but *how* do you surrender yourself while also staying engaged? I believe it is saying yes to all of your feelings; engaging with them by channeling their flow or energy towards feeling or creating versus my normal MO of rejecting and then projecting them onto others or analyzing them to death.

This is the ideal logical response and thus, of course, is aspirational.

In practice, when I sought to self-regulate instead of seeking external regulation and support, I would very often get sucked back into the thinking/anxiety loop. Still, over time and with practice, I found that sometimes I would realize sooner that I was spiraling into anxiety regarding emotion or getting distracted by my mind and ultimately make my way back to Being.

The idea of Being did not always feel safe at the time, but if I could bypass my thinking

and feeling parts and get myself to go to the woods or engage in creative pursuits, it was nearly always safer than seeking external emotional regulation.

Self-Regulation via Self-Soothing. Communing with the woods, my spirit animals and myself could get me into some scary experiences, but the next section, attaching to other, illustrates the real agony I experienced trying to live in integrity with myself while also seeking intimacy and engaging in relationship in a new countercultural way. At certain points in my work, I was deep in attachment anxiety in ways I do not recall tolerating in the past. Having more of a cohesive identity and building confidence in myself was helpful in being able to witness my reactions and take right action, but I also needed to calm my nervous system and provide a secure base for myself so I could have increased exploration regarding intimacy.

The movie [Appendix C] show aspects of my self-soothing process in action, and in the next section you will see examples of the who, what, when, where, and how of self-soothing, and how it works together with forest work to heal my fractured identity, develop trust and confidence, and identify and work with shadow parts and oppressed voices. In the meantime, the following is a full session of out loud self-soothing using a variety of interventions outlined in the text.

February 9, 2021 Magick and I are about a third of the way up Panthera at 7:30 AM about 10° out, a snow storm is coming again. It's been snowing a lot this month.

[Intervention one: Logical reflection] We started our hike today with me thinking about M & how it's turned into this emotional mess versus this fun sexy new love story. And I don't want to be in this emotional mess, I don't mean that like "whaaa I don't wanna be in this emotional mess!" I mean that like "I don't think it's necessary to be this churned up, this upset, it's not helping anybody, it's certainly not making this relationship

any better, and also I'm missing out on the fun!" My horoscope this week was all about embracing and falling into being held, experiencing the joy of that, and I have that, and I'm fighting it. And that's just a waste.

[Intervention two: Connect to the woods] So as I'm thinking this stuff, I start a hike and Raven calls, and I say 'hello Raven!' And smile, and then I wonder if Blue Jay is going to come because Blue Jay is all about speaking truth right? And then no more than 30 seconds later we get a full wave of Blue Jay. I'll have you know we haven't heard Blue Jay around here in quite some time, and after observing Blue Jay and thinking about Blue Jay then it becomes quiet again.

[Intervention three: Remember I can call on spirit animals] I was also remembering how last night—I've still been struggling with emotional turmoil—when I went to sleep pretty early. I envisioned Bear holding me and I tell you I passed right out.

[More logical reflection] I guess it's possible that in this case, in relationships, this emotional upheaval it's not information that I should be hearing as a means to protect myself, but rather old maybe attachment insecurity that's just torturing me. I thought of this yesterday, how I don't think any of this is helping me, how it was just old programming. So I guess tapping is going to be the way through this in a way. Tapping and spirit animals.

[Intervention four: Reassurance and Validation] In the end, it's OK for me to feel sexual pleasure it's OK for me to feel joy it's OK for me to feel loneliness it's OK for me to want it's OK for me to not always get what I want it's OK for me to be bored and to be boring it's OK for me to do nothing and it's OK for me to do a whole lot. It's OK that I'm emotional And it's OK that I'm rational. What doesn't feel OK is that I'm hurting myself

and in hurting myself I'm also potentially hurting other people. What's not OK is for me to not allow myself to have pleasure, not allow myself to have feelings, not allow myself to be all that I am. Except sometimes I'll try to stop myself in these ways and that's OK too, because I can meet that with compassion and understanding, I can feel my way through it and think my way through it and I can go into the next day or I'll wake up before seven and climb the mountain. It's all OK. I have the capacity to navigate all of it.

[Intervention five: Remember living in integrity and my life purpose (alleviate unnecessary suffering) and apply it to myself] And I don't need to fight it. I don't need to sit in it either, and I certainly don't need to project it onto other people and try to work it out through them, how this is unfolding, and it's helpful for me when I don't lose sight of the bigger picture of course. But none of this is real and it's just my mind and wiring playing tricks on me, not because it's a dick but because it's just wired that way. And so I can rewire I suppose. Once I'm aware of it, And maybe I can't, maybe it'll just be the series of repeats over and over and over again and each time around the sun maybe it takes less effort or I get through it with less pain or I just repeat it infinitely. I don't know, I don't know if it matters. But yes, unnecessary suffering. I don't need to suffer unnecessarily. That suffering becomes self-indulgent and it takes me away from experience, it takes me away from loving, it takes me away from love and pleasure. And I've been doing this my whole conscious adult life. And I'm just repeating what was done to me like I'm in some sort of glitch. It just feels like a waste. I'll accept it if I have to if that's the way through it, but it feels unnecessary.

[Intervention six: Self-acceptance and non-attachment] And so I'll turn to the animals and maybe they'll remind me that I'm an animal and I don't need to play the silly

human games. So I continue to work on letting go and navigating any fear that comes up through that and I'll do that consciously and do my best not to reject it and do my best not to create drama around it. I'll just notice it and maybe I need to notice it in other people too and just say, as FJ [my therapist] would say, "there it is" and put it back to sleep or give it to Bear to take care of.

[Intervention seven: Eagle view] Or we can bring the river in here or the streams, we know that no matter what form water is in, it just keeps going and adapting, it doesn't stop—well it does stop, in fact it goes into eddys, it goes into ponds, or at least it slows down but it never stops changing does it? It invites things in, it pushes things out, it just ebbs, and it flows, and so maybe it's just about not getting stuck, or maybe it's about getting stuck for a while like freezing into icicles and then getting unstuck maybe all of it is just OK. Maybe it's how the parts work together and how they're all interconnected and how they help each other and that they're not enemies, they're collaborators. Maybe it's all about Being. Like Owl says. Just Being in, experiencing and adapting and flowing and freezing and thawing and falling and catching and sheltering and flying and slithering and all the things

[Intervention eight: Shamanism and Remembering to be in the now] like the moment after my death when I was everything and then in everything I became everything else and in everything I was OK. In fact I was better than OK, I was filled with peace and joy and expansion and delight and wonder and novelty. It was effortless. Tree became leaf became rain became bee became stream became river became ocean became clouds became rain became tree and so on. If I embrace all these ways of being as they arrive and I don't fight them I could live in peace and wonder. If I stop fighting.

Or if I only fight when that's the best course of action. But even survival feels trivial in this construct. Because I'll just become the next thing.

[Intervention nine: Remember I am empowered, I can shift my reality through shifting my perspective] So maybe it's not all surrender and maybe it's engaged surrender as I was talking so much about earlier last year. There's room for play in there, there's room for discovery, there's room for being a bear cub there's room for being a wolf cub there's room for being Blue Jay there's room for being River there's room for being Tree there's room for being snow and icicle there's room for being Blue Jay, I said that already :-) there's room for being Owl, Roach, Wasp and Bee, Eagle and Crow and Rabbit and Leaf and Snake and Dog and Cat and Rachel too. I can be any or all of these things at once or one at a time, shifting at will according to right action.

[Intervention ten: Experience, Being, Perspective] I gave myself until 8 AM to get to the top of Panthera and here it is 7:57. There's a light snow falling, there's a plane flying over us, Magick is on leash so he doesn't run out into the middle of the ice. I'm about to eat an apple, and for the past three days I've been suffering and struggling with emotional upheaval based on nothing but past experience, nothing about my current reality was reflected in that emotional upheaval other than the loneliness, so it's not nothing is it Rachel? :-) it was just about feeling, it wasn't about fact, and that's OK too. But then this morning came, and we climb the mountain and it's 7:58 and we turned around and we're going back down and then we'll see your clients and maybe M will come and maybe he won't depending on the snowstorm and that will be OK too. Because tomorrow will come and then the day after and even if it doesn't, the most important thing was that I was with it when it was happening and so maybe fighting—[holy shit the

trees. I thought that the trees were making this incredible creaking noise, it turns out that it's a woodpecker and when I stopped to look, I can't see her, but she's there, I recorded it you might wanna look it up, but when I stopped I then noticed all these other little birds flying from branch to branch above, so quiet, but I guess it's breakfast time for woodpecker. What a wonderful day. Wonderous wonderous I guess I'll look up for a while instead of down.] All the things that I fear may happen, they may not happen, but what I know for sure is that as I'm fearing them and worrying about them I'm basically experiencing them already, and what I'm not experiencing is the rest of my world, and the rest of my being. All the worry I have clouds my pleasure and wonder and flow.

[Intervention eleven: Personal responsibility] I do not avoid disaster by thinking about it. And I do not avoid disaster and tragedy by avoiding doing. Because not doing and not being *is* the tragedy. It *is* the disaster. It's my choice and worrying, obsessing, suffering, that is the tragedy, not all the things I worry and suffer over [i.e] the past and the future. Those are not realities. Those are unnecessary suffering. The only life I have is right now. And I have a choice on how I want to live that. And all the ways that I say I don't have a choice or "but I can't help it I'm wired this way" etc. etc. that's inaccurate I believe. Maybe I just need to accept that sometimes I choose to dwell on the past or worry about/plan or rehearse for the future. And maybe in each moment of the now I can recognize that and make a decision about it. And if I choose to Be, isn't that the best choice I can make? No matter what is happening at least it's real. And then I can respond to or engage in what is real. Even if that responding or engaging is just witnessing. Just feeling it. If I was in the past or the future I would've missed Raven, I would've missed Blue Jay, I would've missed Woodpecker. Right now there's a whole world around me

that I'm able to engage in if I choose. So maybe it all is just aligned with the idea of meditation [mindfulness] and coming back to the present moment. But maybe that concept is slightly different than how I imagined it. It's like opening versus trying not to close.

[Intervention twelve: Metaphor and meaning making] Hopefully my wolf (M) will come to me today and I'll get to try this out. Because I miss it. And even if my wolf doesn't, I can still do it. And be it. And here we've come full circle again, Being in right action. Using the brain for what it is built for and not letting it be leader, but just one moving part of many. If Tree was the leader that would be disastrous, if River was the leader that would be disastrous, it all works together. There is no leader. There's being acting reacting experiencing witnessing sleeping eating fucking shitting laughing crying walking running that's all there is, that's all that's real. I wanted to be a real girl. I've always wanted to be real and I think this is the way. ...

Magick was tearing through the woods up hills and down hills and he was Being. He was being a dog. And he also reminded me of my mind getting caught on the smell and trying to trace it down and then I was able to break through Magick's focus. And he returned to me. And I thought "that's my mind." And I get so frustrated that he doesn't come back to me. And I guess it's similar to my mind. But he always comes back. So does my mind, so maybe I have to know when to leash it so that I can keep it safe from overdoing it, getting injured, getting into a fight or eating a porcupine or even just so it can walk next to me when I want to Be. And know when to take off the leash to let it run free and follow the scent. Magick is always teaching me everything. And by everything I mean some things.

[Intervention thirteen: Witness the pattern to remember non-attachment to fear, everything changes] So I'm home now, but on my way home I started thinking about how to do this dissertation, and I thought maybe it is reflective of life, my life. Which is that I reach this point where I am right now, totally in the Being. I'm calm and centered and grounded and connected to nature, Eagle thought and Snake and then I start to slip a little bit, and I start to worry or plan or dream, and then I fight that and then I start fighting things and then I start fighting things more and more and more and more and it gets really painful and then I ground myself again. And I wonder if I laid out the information in that circle, if that might be a good reflection of the experience.

Thirteen interventions in one 3.1 mile hike, not to mention the hike itself, which is also an intervention! Remember these notes are dictations, so I am saying these things out loud to myself and pausing to listen for my reactions and responses. Saying things out loud also ensures I am engaging with myself from a place of integrity; the woods will often trip me if I start to go back into denial and similarly when I hear myself speak, it is easier to catch my ruses. I love that list because it shows the many ways I self-soothe and also shows how my patterns work and a meta analysis of them in real time.

In summary, regarding self as a secure base, after months of practice building confidence and trust directly with myself, I started at least communicating as if I was able to accept my changeability, sometimes loose relationship with "honesty," and my distrust of "truth" as part of my identity. I identified the importance of discernment, non-attachment, self-acceptance, engaged surrender, and self-regulation. These together allow me to live in integrity. I am not suggesting that I am *always* living in integrity with myself and others, and true transparency is often more of an aspirational value, but I can say that my rejected "lying" self feels more fully

integrated into my identity and therefore, I am eventually able to break through denial and projection to feel more empowered. Based on my continued work with myself, I do believe that even when I am scared, I (do my best to) have integrity.

And now for what happens when I put all this thinking, feeling, Being, and doing into interpersonal practice...

Interpersonal Being—M as a Secure Base

When I help others, and sometimes myself, my logic and insight has proven to be reliably sound.

September 1, 2020, When I first met A nine years ago and we fell in love I looked back on all the years before meeting him and all the relationships that I was in that I fought so hard for and that brought me so much pain and I said, “I wish I could say to my old self it’s OK, let go. It all works out in the end. You don’t need to be in a bad relationship that you work and work and work on, you don’t need to fight to be seen or respected or understood. Someone’s out there for you.”

... I am the one I was looking for. And if I had given myself all the things that I’ve been looking for from others for all these years, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. But [today] I looked at my marriage, and how many years I fought and fought and fought to make it work and I said, “Do you want to look back at this and again say, ‘I wish I had just let it go?’” No.

I’m not gonna repeat that mistake again. I’m letting go. And I believe that not only will I be able to meet all my needs, but when I’m ready and my needs are met, I’ll probably get a bunch of my wants met as well, by myself and probably by others. Either way it’s all gonna work out.

This excerpt was from the first “official” day of my “Experiment.” When I am attached to myself, I can connect to my wisdom and feel safe and held by the universe. However, when I go into an attached place with someone else, it is a different story. When I feel something akin to love for an intimate partner, I feel great joy; I desperately want to connect, so I latch on to that “love” like I am drowning. When I do finally feel close, or I perceive that my partner feels close to me, I cannot tolerate the closeness or sense of security. I become extremely anxious and feel compelled to run as far away as possible (as outlined here, eight months into my experiment):

May 16, 2021, When I hold on tight to my relationship, everything narrows, I get rigid, opportunities are closed off, I feel scared and limited, I start to worry about if I love M more than he loves me, if he even cares about me at all, and I spiral ... but once I let go of all those narratives, of trying to hold on or get him to love me, I see what is and I am filled with abundance, joy, love. I feel powerful, free, loved and loving. Then, that abundance feels threatening, or I get anxious I will lose it, and I start to want to run or hold on tight again and everything narrows, I get rigid, terrified ... and round and round we go. I want to learn and embrace adaptation because control and attachment are illusions and cause severe pain. How can I stay in and accept abundance?

I want more than anything to feel and connect deeply. I believe I am worthy and capable of being desired and feeling intense desire. Due to experience, I trust the love I deserve will come to me... but I am also profoundly insecure, filled with shame and disgust for myself, and prone to sabotage what serves me. These are examples of holding multiple conflicting realities simultaneously. It is legit crazy-making and at this stage of my relationship, it is my reality.

Doing this experiment on developing a cohesive identity and securely attaching to myself required me to confront this fearful-avoidant attachment and self-objectification and witness

what happened. In this section you will see how I lose myself in the face of other *and* how I hold onto myself. You will also read how my socialization affects my sexual function, sense of self, and ability to be empowered and engage authentically with personal responsibility. This section is presented more or less in chronological order as there is no real beginning or end.

This is Not a Fairy-tale Love Story

A and I started talking about Polyamory or Ethical Non Monogamy (ENM) in September of 2019, 6 months before I asked for a divorce. By the time I started my dissertation, I was a year into exploring this concept. In early September 2020, I convinced myself that (a) I was not going to get into a relationship with one person—I needed to develop an attachment to myself after all; and (b) eight months was enough time to get over the end of my marriage. The October 2020 video of me sobbing over a “rejection” from A when I think I need him to help me (Appendix C) is a prime example of my denial.

In addition to my flirtation with a prior lover Z, I had been casually dating people for months, trying out my new countercultural self-prioritization chops. I actually do not mind dating. It can be fun, though being rejected or rejecting other people is another matter.

September 15, 2020, Yesterday [I allowed myself to remember the pain I had previously felt trying to get over Z] and I was like “what the fuck am I doing?! I can’t be with him! I have integrity and self-respect, right?” ... So walking in the woods this morning I started noticing that after I was like “that’s fine, not interested, move on” I started saying a bunch of shit to myself to remind myself of all the ways that I am vulnerable, all the things that can go wrong, my fears re money, etc. I started wondering if ... I was pulling out my own vulnerabilities because I’m afraid of my power, if that’s what I do. Once I feel powerful, I remind myself “Wait a minute! You know you’re vulnerable!” I need to explore this

further. This is an example of using a mirror on yourself when you're upset about somebody else's behavior. How am I using my vulnerability, exposure of my vulnerability, to hold myself back? So I feel abandoned and alone and unloved? Crow and Blue Jay call all around me right now. Maybe I'm onto something.

Immediately after [exploring my vulnerabilities], I did a loop in the woods, a tiny loop, retracing my steps and the woods were silent. and when I tried again to bring up all the things I'm scared about, all the stupid little things that could possibly go wrong with my life and fall apart I said "no! I'm not going to do that! I'm going to live in my power, regardless of the consequences." And I think this is where the witch theme comes in. The witch living in the woods. If I live in my power, I scare everybody away it seems, even myself. And so in order to be in my power, perhaps I'll have to be a witch living alone in the forest playing with and communing with Nature, Source, animals. I'll take that chance.

The woods, my growing awareness, trust and confidence in myself, and an ultimatum from my wise-self gave me the strength to finally end things with Z; and then in walked M.

Empowered Relational Beginnings

Immediately upon ending things with Z, being a person who can barely tolerate being alone, I doubled down on my engagement in the dating scene, such as it was during the pandemic:

September 21, 2020-D, As soon as I told Z I wasn't going to be with him anymore, this guy on OKC [OkCupid] who wrote me 2 times over the past 8 months wrote again and I was like "oh fuck it I'm going to talk to him" so I responded, we texted and went on a date like the next day [September 15, 2020] (a hike in the woods). It was great. Then we

went on another date four days later. It was also great. [Enter idealized description of M]
I know he's into me. He wrote a song for me, which is nice. I don't know how I feel about it. I was just talking to JT and saying I don't know how to date somebody without being insecurely attached. Because I'm attached to myself, I don't know how to navigate my feelings. I'm not drawn to him, I'm not repelled by him, I like him, I'm not sure about chemistry. I'm just taking it slow. I wonder: how do people with a secure attachment date?

In hindsight, I am not surprised to see my hubris here. I was not even close to being securely attached to myself. More accurately, I was using Z, self-soothing, alcohol, and the woods to help me calm my anxiety, get a clearer sense of my identity, and start to prioritize myself. Still, M, the man I met in the woods on that referenced day, two weeks into my dissertation, was another example of synchronicity. I had written a song and created a painting prior to meeting him that led me to feel like I conjured him, and indeed, given his timing and being perfectly designed to push all my buttons, it often feels like I did! I told him about my dissertation and invited him into my experiment with full acceptance that at any time he could decide he did not want to be a test subject. He is still here ten months later. We will see how long we last but given the joy and love I feel towards myself and him when we are together, I hope it is a long time.

M provides a never-ending supply of chances to build and break my developing trust and confidence in myself; because really, how do you judge if you are truly developing a secure attachment to yourself if you are not being constantly triggered by old attachment wounds? How do you identify all the ways you have sabotaged and sought to control relationships until you consciously and repeatedly act in counterintuitive ways—walking into fear—to defy defenses? How can you learn that you do not have an identity until you find yourself refusing to be in

fantasy, refusing to follow oppressive norms, and trying not to reject or adapt to a love interest's alien way of being? How do you recognize you are abandoning yourself until you experience holding yourself back from turning to them for soothing or emotional regulation? How do you assert yourself, your wants and needs emotionally and sexually, and get to see how deeply programmed you are without a sex god as a partner? How do you confront your limiting views on monogamy or your insecure attachment if you do not try to integrate ENM into your relationship consisting of two wildly possessive, insecure people? Maybe there is an easier way to grow, but that's not how I roll.

It is important to note that much of what I think/worry about in relation to M (and most everyone else) is mostly a reflection of my own internal struggles or rejected parts, and very little of the worries and struggles I outline here have ever been shared with him. It is also important to note that you are basically reading a verbal diary, so my emphasis was on in-the-moment emotion, not on fairness in representation. Please keep this in mind, reader, as you come across him and other characters.

September 15, 2020- D cont., A few years ago I realized that I wasn't afraid of being raped anymore, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

As we know rape isn't about sex, it's about power. And when I no longer felt I was 'young and attractive enough' to be raped, it was like accepting I had lost one of my powers: my beauty was no longer a threat and thus I couldn't incite violence/a power struggle... and I also lost the 'opportunity' to have my power taken away.

So now I have rape fantasies; actually, I always have. And I was thinking about that. Is it because I want that power back? Or because I want my power taken away?

Perhaps that's why middle-aged women are disregarded in society, because I feel

like I'm just recognizing that my actual power is so threatening that *even I am* afraid to embody/live in it. And society is in cahoots about this! 'Well, you're not pretty anymore, so you're powerless!' Fuck you. That's just one way where you can't take my power away, unless I let you. And I'm not going to let you. And I'm not going to do it myself. Period. I don't need to be reminded that my power can be taken away, I do it to myself every day. I'm not going to fantasize about that anymore, OK maybe I will, but it'll be interesting to try to shift it. [Rant on the patriarchy holding women's power down]

In this excerpt I am struggling with my relationship with power and vulnerability. I am watching the ways that I sabotage myself, giving myself a pep talk, trying a new way of thinking to help bolster my confidence, and getting angry, which are ways that I maintain a sense of control. I am also (attempting to be moderately) transparent about a struggle I have regarding my sexual fantasies and how they contradict my feminist standpoint, read: foreshadowing.

Related to power, before I become attached to someone I feel powerful and clear. My ego likes the chase, the playing out of predator and prey, and I tend to feel confident (unless, of course I am rejected). Perhaps this is similar to when I go into an avoidant place; when I can convince myself I am not attached, I feel in control, almost invincible. From this state of imaginary empowered independence I mapped out how, in my initial dates with M, I was attempting to stay confident while also establishing more trust in myself through being more authentic and trying to behave in ways that represented my aspirational values.

September 25, 2020- D, Date 4 with M tonight. Such a strange experience. Things that are different

1. I'm not trying to charm him
2. I'm not trying to uncover his vulnerabilities as a means to protect myself

3. I'm not trying to bring him out emotionally or otherwise, not asking probing questions or seeking to engage/delight
4. I'm not trying to quickly analyze/help/get to know/figure him out. I have no clear strategy/agenda/ or driving force behind me
5. I'm not going along with sexual stuff if I don't feel like it
6. I'm asking for what turns me on even if it's difficult
7. I don't need anything from him
8. I can't really read his energy either, he seems very self-contained but still warm/engaged/engaging, it feels genuine. So it's like I'm using new languages and lenses to uncover what is vs. what could be.
9. I don't obsess or really even think about any "relationship" bc nothing is there yet and I won't live in a fantasy of what could be, I'm experiencing what is. Mostly I think I really enjoy it! I am surrendering to my experience without attachment. Sometimes that makes me silent for periods or especially awkward. So be it.
10. I don't try to pump up his ego or make myself especially likable by complimenting him or noticing special things
11. I am not craving his approval, interest in me, etc. it's nice! But it's like my ego is almost totally asleep. I know who I am, what makes me special. I see me, Owl sees me. I don't need anyone else to see me.

I wondered tonight if the "calm" I feel around him (relaxed, at ease, no anxiety, no mind chatter/judgements/analysis) is not only the self-attachment but also that I'm not looking to [find and] uncover his vulnerabilities ... I wondered if I was doing the same to me, probing into my vulnerabilities whenever I felt good.

I'm curious about (though I can also shrug off if I choose to) if I am applying other old/outdated rules to my decisions/feelings about engaging in intimacy... I don't like to show myself, why? I don't need to strategize ways to keep myself safe, I just need to communicate and figure out what I want to say yes or no to.

I'm wondering about *how* to want. Have I ever wanted in the way I am asking myself now? Meaning, of course I have wanted before, but that felt wrapped up in a fantasy. Always what I couldn't have or couldn't maintain. This feels more like "what might make me feel good in this moment?" I'm not so worried about consequences.

... I'm not wildly attracted to him but I have a feeling if I let myself connect to him, I would become wildly attracted. Perhaps another reason why stopping at making out is what feels right to my body.

So after our date tonight I wondered VERY briefly if I was too weird, too self-focused, too boring? I also was worried that I was too rejecting in our mini kissing session which was not very successful. [removed text from M that reassured me]

This new way of being was great! I felt more power and control and was much more open and fearless. Of course I also included a reassuring text from M but neglected to acknowledge that I was seeking external approval. Regardless, I felt like aside from not knowing how to want (no biggie), I had it all figured out! I had been rejecting my power and needed to reclaim it! Easy peasy! However, like so many of the processes I discovered through this work, there was nothing easy or straightforward about it.

It had been a long time since I felt powerful and an especially long time since I felt sexually powerful. For years before this, I had been desperate to explore my sexuality, and that was not an option in my marriage. Now that I was free, I was looking for action! However, even

putting aside my toxic socialization regarding sex, like so many other aspects of my personality, I am a sexual contradiction. I am bold and crass as well as shy and prudish; I have never had casual sex; I have a very vivid imagination and am turned on by wildly perverted and taboo themes. In addition, I can easily explore and coach clients and others about all manner of sexual issues; I used to be a sex educator; and I have written a significant amount of erotica. Yet, in the moment, I cannot directly advocate for myself or say sexual words—if forced too, I will become shy and nearly die from embarrassment. I also have a history of sexual trauma and tend to get confused and even dissociative during sexual interactions. In summary, I am impossibly repressed and wildly sexual at the same time. Given this, before going too far into a sexual relationship with M, I felt it was important to be in integrity with my process and be more honest with myself about my desires.

Sept 26, 2020-D, Glitch tonight after a lovely evening. Understanding that sexually I'm not the usual. Which is a jolt to self-esteem for folks. And I've seen that again and again. And maybe I just need a kinky person, which is fine, but somehow it seems we are all just too fucked up or otherwise boring and I had fun tonight. And M is a great kisser, but I'm not attracted to him. Sunday is coming. Connect with [shamanic friend] JK. Walks in am. I love you.

I knew I was “not the usual” sexually. The night before I struggled to communicate to M what I wanted, and part of me was convinced that I did not *really* know what I wanted anyway. When I explored this topic with myself more, I allowed myself to recognize that I did have an overarching understanding of what turned me on:

September 27, 2020- D ...on our hike, I was thinking more about [what I had shared regarding my sexual needs], and I thought I was missing attunement, you have to attune

to me to understand me sexually. Then I thought, “but you can’t attune to you, Rachel, because there’s nothing really to attune to because you just shut down” Well, not shut down, but I’m guarded. And then I thought about that some more and I thought, wait a minute, it isn’t attunement ...

And I was also clear [with M] that I don’t know [what I want]. But I do know, it takes attention, it takes intention, it takes interest in my pleasure in an experiential way. Perhaps it’s that effort and creativity in itself that excites me. Just being hot for my body or my looks is not enough. And just thinking that intellectually I excite you is not enough. You have to engage with me in all those ways in different ways and maybe an inside out way but in a way that shows that I matter. Because I do. And not just in theory, also in action. Giving up is not sexy. Getting caught in your own fear and shame around inadequacy is not sexy. It could be enough to turn to me ferociously or silly and say “I’m going to figure you out! If it’s the last thing I do!” That probably would’ve been enough. In fact, I gave instruction! And then I explained what I was doing... And yes in the end, I was fully myself. Without apologies and that might’ve been the end for it and that is completely OK. I love you.

Also, Daddy Long Legs (M) [Appendix C] from July 11, 2020 spells all this out, listening to the body, also about Being. Rachel, please listen to yourself. You must listen. Finally (probably not finally) remember that sex-crazed is chemical. And it probably won’t last like this forever. But that doesn’t mean you have to lose all of it. Listen to your body.

Being this transparent with myself about contradictory thoughts may not seem like a big deal. However, it was, because I was starting to engage with M sexually and was committed to

advocating for myself, which I had not been able to do successfully in the past. It was also important because what I discovered was that to feel desire, I needed attention and intention. I was not going to allow myself to long for sexual connection but then disengage as I had for so much of my life, which would essentially lead to being used (and, consequently, blaming this on my partner). If I knew what I wanted, and if I wanted to stay in integrity with myself, I was going to have to continue to communicate and take up space. At the end of the note I remind myself that I had already tried to show this to myself many months before and should listen this time. Either way, I was working to ignore my anxiety and trying to tune into my body.

October 10-11, 2020- D, It's the next morning after my date with M last night... It's very interesting with him, I don't actively seek to disrobe him, literally or figuratively :-) I'm not trying to take his power away like I do with most men. I also don't put any future stories on him. I don't daydream about where things could go, I don't even think about it frankly. I still don't know if I'm attracted to him in the usual way. But I know that several times last night my body reacted and responded to him in surprising ways. When my mind was sort of having a disgust reaction, my body was getting warmer. Also unusual. I'm very comfortable with him. And I also don't really think about him much, I'm not attaching to him.

Sex is the big thing here, because I think we both want to have sex, I know he does. And I think I do too on some levels, but I know myself, once I do have sex that's all I think about. And I want [whomever I attach to] to be available to me. And there's all this old shit around 1. my [sexual desire] being too overwhelming for people, which I talked to him about and of course he denied that would be the case with him, which everybody does 2. my trying to [assess] if it's dangerous; why *would* it be dangerous to

have sex with him, want him, and have him? I guess [bc he may] not be interested? This is an old script. He said ‘why would a dragon be afraid?’ And I thought ‘yeah why would a dragon be afraid?!’ I basically said, I’m too fragile to tolerate going through loss again or wanting—maybe it’s not fragility, maybe it’s just like I don’t want to deal with another huge influx of emotion around sex!

Well, you know the dragon can live alongside the fear ... but I also just have enough shit to deal with, I don’t want to be navigating all the emotions that sex brings up or do I? It’s like I don’t want to be obsessed. And that’s my fear. But this is me avoiding experience. Thinking that I can’t handle it. And maybe that’s true, what I do know is that I have big shields up around this and I should respect those right? This is where it gets confusing! And it’s not about fulfilling his wants, honestly, I don’t care right now, it’s nice hearing about them. It doesn’t bother me, I don’t feel pressure. I think I’m just trying to make sense of my ambivalence.

And maybe it’s OK to just have sex when I’m really feeling it and since we’re [I’m] not there I shouldn’t be pushing myself, I shouldn’t be trying to override my defenses around this. Like I started with, letting things unfold. So there you have it. One thing I know is that I do feel really comfortable around him despite [some surface hesitations]...

Anyway it’s interesting that I’m enjoying it and he’s the first person that I’ve dated lately that I actually really enjoy having around and I am being 100% percent my cuckoo self I’ll tell you that much! Last night, total migraine cognitive loopy and I just flowed with it. As did he! ... and when I’m around him I want to play songs, and I did some sort of authentic movement dancing last night just ‘cause I felt like it. And that was

so great! Because I was just being myself, how I was feeling in the moment without embarrassment or shame. This seems like the way to do it. Without all the other angst and trying to control and seeking to understand—to just do it because it feels good and only do what feels good. And stop whenever we want and change your mind whenever you want just like the song that I wrote called “Python’s Nest” [Appendix C].

You can see my struggle with discernment in this excerpt. I do not know which parts of me are talking, let alone who to listen to. I was also trying to make sure I stay “safe,” because historically (and it turns out, with M too) I get very attached after having sexual intercourse and this tends to cause enormous emotional pain.

The above excerpt was from the day before I ended up having sex with M the first time. In hindsight it appears I was bargaining, justifying, and being somewhat in denial. I was unsure of and trying to navigate my wants and needs versus trying to respond to what I thought was expected of me. Meditating on this I thought about the double bind for people with my attachment style and women in general; even if not explicit, there is typically pressure to have sex when dating and perhaps you even want to; but if you have sex, it will likely increase bonding, attachment, dependence, or in my case, preoccupation, so what to do?

What I was starting to learn through my work with myself was that if I did *the opposite* of what my anxiety wanted me to do—the opposite of what felt “safe” for me (i.e., leading with my defenses)—I got the best outcomes. That process could be very scary, especially because I was not always aware of what was defense versus actual attempts at protecting myself from potential danger. Regardless, as we know, I was attempting to use integrity when engaging with myself and others.

In the weeks after our first sexual encounter beyond kissing, I do indeed become

obsessed. I go into a sex haze, and I cannot think straight. I struggle to remind myself that I do not love him, it is just a chemical reaction, but I am like a starving person and he is the most delicious of foods. In the woods, and when I am not in his presence, I am able to continue to hold onto my new identity and my work on self-attachment. But when with M, I am already starting to lose my focus. I am also fighting valiantly to maintain my sense of self and make sure my voice, wants and needs remain clear. At the same time, my oppressive thoughts and self-objectification are surfacing.

October 14, 2020-D ... he's had a lot of lovers, and for the past near decade I've been with one person [with limited sexual connection]. And so I'm feeling like there's a power imbalance but [M reminded me that because of my insight and therapeutic expertise] we both provide things for each other that are needed ... and that felt really good to me, because I was feeling very scared about being less comfortable, experienced, confident. And he's feeling the same way about being with me authentically. So who knows where this will go. I'm struggling hard to not want to tie him up and claim him ...

(Expansion written 10/19/20: Also, I guess this [fear around things being imbalanced] comes down to not just the reciprocity/ledger business, or feeling like "love" is transactional and conditional or being "good enough" or "useful" enough or any other old ghosts, but also my worry about dependency and what would happen if I let go and really enjoy someone without feeling that I have to make sure I am giving "the same or more" in return. Like, if I let myself enjoy and be in an experience that provides pleasure, will I then become so greedy I eat all the things and stop sharing or giving or whatever?)

This brings up this idea about objectification again, like I am an object to be used and therefore I should not expect to have pleasure to begin with, but if I DO have

pleasure then I shouldn't get used to it, accept it, or hell—feel like it is my due! I shouldn't demand it, disengage if I am not receiving it, revel in it when I get it, expect it and help create it (through communication, collaboration, etc). Instead I worry if my nipples are too big, my skin too loose, my cellulite too much, worry about any hair on my body, feel embarrassed and think it should be removed, my bruises are unsightly, etc. etc. etc. That's in the midst of reveling in the uniqueness of my lover, seeing and embracing the imperfections. Why shouldn't I receive the same consideration?

I worry about the imbalance of power, but then when M suggests we are equal, I find a way to disempower myself again through hating on my body and trying to deny my own pleasure. Clearly, this relationship is starting to stir things up for me emotionally. In hindsight, I can also see how my insecure attachment is starting to creep in. A bit over a week into having sex with him and I am already starting to worry about losing him, this person I barely knew, when before having sex I was ambivalent at best about him.

Thus, I struggle to stay in reality and not fantasy. I struggle to maintain my curiosity and openness. At the same time, I am working to stay objective enough to notice when my reactions are due to the past or the present. I start to be triggered by things with M, but I am able to self-soothe and circle back to "reality." In my self-talk, I am also able to take responsibility for my part in old dynamics, I am starting to feel empowered versus feeling like a victim.

Using ENM as a means to help me manage my anxiety, which I had been doing from the beginning with M, starts to lose traction as six weeks in, M and I decide to prioritize each other.

October 25, 2020-D, ... M and I discussed the other day being "primary partners" and I'm like actually convinced that he's lying to me or seeing other people or whatever. I am loving being with M, but when we are apart, despite efforts to self-soothe, my anxiety

spirals. I am convinced he is a con artist, that he is using me, etc. and although I am able to ground myself, when I am not with him, it takes significant work.

October 25, 2020-D cont., ... And just walking at Panthera here, I started thinking that maybe in addition to feeling my feelings I should make sure that I attribute them to ideas that serve me. What I mean by that is not to try to change the feeling or hide the feeling, or analyze or think through the feeling, maybe, well maybe this is also analyzing.

Meaning making. But how would these feelings serve me? Like [living in a fantasy re A] if I'd let myself feel what I was feeling those feelings could've served me by waking me up. So how can these feelings [fears and joys about M] serve me? You know, using them for what they are for, versus trying to silence them or change them. Owl says Be them. Mouse says listen to them and be alert, Bear says sit with them or revel in them. Wolf says run with them, embody them. Crow says talk to your friends? Let them transform you? Play with them? Don't attach to them or take them too seriously.

I try to figure out how to ensure my feelings serve me so I do not attempt to shut myself down. My emotional response is intense, but it is not all paranoid anxiety. I am also allowing myself to feel joy and pleasure...

October 25, 2020-D cont., ... so here are my feelings as I'm able to understand them. I feel overwhelming happiness. I feel satisfied. I feel seen. I feel lusted after. So I feel sexy. I feel powerful. Oh no, am I catastrophizing M because I feel powerful? Because I do! I feel so big. So generous. So present. I have enormous lust. And longing. I know I don't love him but I definitely adore him. Like giggle happy sex and love and attachment hormone. His body makes me crazy. He's getting more and more irresistible and attractive every time I'm with him. He surprises me. This whole daddy thing is kind of

intense. And I feel so little around him. So little and big. I don't need to trust him with everything. I don't need to hold onto him nor will I. I don't need to binge him. I don't think he's going anywhere. But he might go somewhere. And I'd get used to that.

When I'm with him, how do I see myself? I definitely see myself as being really sexy and attractive. Delightful. Complicated. Mercurial. Edgy. We say each other's names a lot. I mean during sex. And other "love" times. Like a prayer almost or a god. I do feel like a goddess and yes, sometimes like a god. So yeah, we're both attaching, and I really need to stay attached to myself. I am the priority. The priority.

So here I go again, I was just saying [to myself] I have a couple red flags but I think they're yellow flags. I also have met his son who is fucking amazing. This guy is not a player. He's charming that is for sure, and he is a Lothario, is that what they're called? Blue Jay agrees. But [a bunch of justifications on why he's trustworthy] And he sets firm boundaries. So unless he and his son are in some sort of con together, I feel like taking him at face value is acceptable. Besides What's the worst that could happen? Again, it's like we talked about, so I feel foolish? That's nothing new. I'm going to enjoy every fucking minute of this. And he can talk about the future all he wants but I'm staying in the now.

Here I start to also explore some more of my taboo sexual desires, specifically about being small and taken care of; part of me sees this as healing, and part of me judges it as being re-traumatizing. Either way, I am enjoying him a lot while also trying to maintain my sense of self, which is challenging for a number of reasons; one of which is that he is a very big man with a very big personality and I usually date bookish introverts. *Note: I want to be clear that any references to "Daddy" are metaphorical and have nothing to do with my actual father, who did*

not abuse me, and for whom I do not harbor sexual feelings.

The following is an example of how I am starting to notice that I am losing myself and starting to justify the behavior. At the same time I am consciously working to avoid being actively defensive and attempting to address my conditioning in my interactions with him despite the anxiety it causes. While there is bravery in this, I am also concerned about doing something wrong, worried about the potential reaction to me showing up more as myself.

October 25, 2020-D cont., Oh yeah! Yesterday, I processed a little bit with him feeling like at times he doesn't pay attention or make enough space for me, you know he's got a lot of energy, and he's very focused on himself. As are we all. But it's like puppy dog energy, you know it's a lot, which is exactly what I wanted. And so I realized then and I was very clear with him I don't want him to pull back that energy, I really don't. What I need to do is put myself forward and take up more space! I need to take up more space and that's what I wanted, why I wanted this [extroverted] energy, so that I could push against something. That's how expansion happens, remember? ... I really want to start taking up more space.

And ...I'm a little concerned that because I'm new or at least rusty at taking up space, it's going to be awkward for a while like I'm going to be edgy. I don't want to fall into criticism, which is apparently what I do, like I put you down so I can get bigger, fuck that no, so maybe part of it is joining the energy, it's just that we're so different. Anyway, so I might be awkward about it at first. I don't want to be sarcastic about it either. I want to be straightforward without being edgy. But that's like telling somebody to stop talking so I can talk, I don't know... Back to the woods.

I remind myself that I need to show up more. At the same time I start to worry that if I take up

more space and practice being more myself I may not be “perfect,” and it will push him away even though I was very much my “imperfect” self when we first met and he was clearly into me. At the end of that walk, I start to think about my body, which is a pattern for me. However, in this case, it is mostly positive. Arguably that is because I am quite thin at this time.

October 25, 2020-D cont., Of course [walking in the woods] is going to be interrupted again by me talking about my body. So I have like a super lean body right now. Like I weigh less than I have probably since high school. And I got muscle too. And I love my body. I mean it’s old or older, and looser and mottled and scarred but I feel like a fucking feline, a big cat! Like a panther. I’m like, I don’t know, I guess it’s a dragon. I am working with that. Because I don’t want to go back into body obsession. It’s nice to be able to wear clothes. I gotta go buy some that fit me! Literally everything I own is like giant on me. Well I guess I shouldn’t say literally :-) 98%. I’m not bragging either. Or am I? I just love it. I love moving with it. I love fucking while looking at it. I watched him in the mirror the other day fucking me and it was like holy shit just fucking sexy. And I know part of that is just how I’m carrying myself because I feel it. I feel sexy. I feel powerful. So good. Also, M was “joking” with NJ [my friend] last night about curing my migraines. Well guess what. Obviously they’re not cured and obviously I have cognitive shit going on that’s pretty intense. But I have no pain...

It feels amazing to love myself and see myself as sexy and powerful. I am not counting on him to reassure me; I am owning my body and power here. At the same time, aligned with self-objectification, I equate that power with my being thin.

About a month into our sexual relationship, my insecurity and concerns about losing myself started to become issues I felt I must address, so I started to confront my reactions and

experiment. I use my spirit animals to help me ground and soothe myself when experimenting.

November 4, 2020...Anyway what I've been thinking about on the way up [the mountain] ... M came over last night and I wasn't feeling close to him ... I wasn't thinking about him and hadn't been thinking about him for like a day practically, and I was nervous for a second that my body wouldn't respond. That I wouldn't have feelings for him or it would be a difficult transition which is usually the case with me. Well, I said to myself then that I was just going to go with it and just trust my body and trust my—I guess—self-attachment. And ability to allow myself to feel pleasure and connection without desperate longing or pain! And indeed that is what happened. In fact, he came in all huge and sexy. I wanted him, like, instantly, in my mind I'm not sure about my body. But I definitely reacted to him and I got nervous.

And in his usual creative way (note: most creative when trying to get inside of me). He was saying he wanted to go to my bed and I was saying it's too early and I wasn't ready, which was true. So he sat on our couch and was like "well, do you want to be princess do you want to be blah blah blah" and I was like "princess is too vulnerable, I'm not feeling in a vulnerable place or a young place for that matter. I'm just uncertain, I think." I had a lack of confidence, maybe? Anyway I said "you know, let me ground myself." I closed my eyes and I went to Wolf and I embodied Wolf and I felt—oh I also brought Bear in to hold me so that I could feel safe—anyway, it worked because we totally fucked like wolves. It was fucking amazing.

And my body totally knows what it's doing, and I don't need to be desperate or scared or nervous or obsessive or maintain constant connection in order to be sexual, in order to feel pleasure, in order to connect with somebody that I really like a lot. I do think

part of it is him, because he's just right. And he totally turns me on.

But also it's because I have me. And because of Wolf. And because of Bear. My body was made for pleasure, my body was made to hike, to run, the strain, to receive, to give. My body is mine. To do or not do any of those things. My body was not made to sit on the couch or chairs and read and work and droop and die.

Thus, I am able to ground myself. I am loving myself and experimenting and building my confidence. I am taking responsibility for my own desire, my own fear, and I am communicating. I am connecting to my body and my support system (spirit animals) versus getting caught in my anxiety. This is a victory for me; I feel powerful and wild.

From the very start of our sexual relationship, M and I have a schedule we follow; we see each other 3 set nights a week, and we have a lot of sex, hours and hours of sex every visit. In each visit, we follow a similar pattern. He comes to my house (or I go to his), we have sex, then we drink and eat, we have sex again, maybe have more sex again in the middle of the night and then in the morning again. This works for me. Once I am in a sexual relationship, I have a high sex drive and this dude can keep up with me. However, I am not much of a routine person, so that feels challenging. In addition, it deeply hurts me each time he leaves, and when he comes back I struggle to reconnect. In the past, I would have gone along with his wants, ignored my struggle, and sacrificed myself to be sure he stayed wanting me. In this case, I start to reclaim and advocate for myself.

November 9, 2020-D, It's been a long weekend! [list of activities with various friends and 2 nights in a row with M] M and I had our first, maybe second... challenge. M had a whole plan for our time together that he shared with me and I participated in, but when I got [to his house] I was feeling really insecure, but he was right on schedule and I was

not following the itinerary. I couldn't, because I was feeling really insecure and disconnected. [Between seeing him and now] his text messages were distant, I started worrying that I had done something wrong the night before—I drank too much and forgot parts of the evening but also I know I had intentionally been more myself, more engaged... and I wasn't up for having sex right away even though we were having fun together and I felt connected to him, I just wasn't feeling it.

I did agree to go up to his bedroom, but when he started the sexing I told him, “Look, I’m feeling really insecure” and he was like “what do we need to do?” and came up with a couple of ideas and I was like “no, those are not going to work right now, I just need to tell you...” and I shared my insecurity. [He got defensive] I kept pulling back and explaining “this isn’t about you, you haven’t done anything wrong I’m just feeling insecure” But it didn’t help, he was seeming to get smaller and smaller and I was like “Pump the brakes! You weren’t feeling this way five minutes ago, these insecurities are mine not yours, you can’t have them. Ground yourself, come back to me.” He couldn’t [due to past relationship triggers] I didn’t want to teach him but, I also didn’t want to take care of him, and my insecurities were of course growing [in my mind] (“this dude is trying to guilt me into having sex with him, all he cares about is sex, he’s using you, etc.”) so I was stuck.

Finally I was like “M, I’m not going to repeat the past shit that I’ve done [in similar situations]... I’m watching myself try to fix this, feeling like I should be acting sexy so you could have sex because that is what you want and so I could help build you back up, but that’s disrespectful to you and to me.” He asked me to explain and I said “you are more confident than this, you don’t need me to fluff your ego, you don’t want to

be with me if I am not feeling desire, instead, you need to be present with me and I need to be present with me." He brought up that he was triggered... and I was like "I am happy to talk about/explore your past issues but not right now, because right now I'm feeling insecure and this stuff [reactions and feelings] with you didn't come up until I was feeling insecure and I'm not playing that game, you know, I'm not going to put myself aside to take care of you and then resent you, so what are we going to do?"

So he didn't know of course and I said "well, if we can't ground ourselves right now then perhaps we should just get up." So we did and he said "OK, I'm going to take a shower and we will go out" he took his phone with him and my insecurity was like, "see! He's going to talk to someone else!" etc. I just started to spiral but I pulled myself back together. When he got out of the shower, he looked hot, and I started wanting him again, but the timing wouldn't work. We went out, and he was chatting away as usual in the car and I was like "M, I'm still feeling insecure" he asked what I wanted and I said I didn't know but perhaps some reassurance. He gave me the usual "I really like where things are going, I think you're great, blah blah" and I knew that was not going to work for me. [We're halfway up Panthera and I heard the goose! So crazy! There's one, oh there's four of them, cool they, just flew overhead]

Anyway, I was really disappointed [by his attempts at reassurance] as you can imagine but I was also so proud of myself because in the past, I would've gone along with the sex and ... he still kept trying the same things, you know, for him to get his way and I was like "no! I'm not doing it!" So I was glad I didn't fall into old patterns, and that I didn't try to take care of him... We talked about how my experience is that oftentimes men's feelings come up when their partner's feelings come up, or at least for me, when I

share feelings, it is met with my partner getting defensive and responding with their feelings. And it's like "you're entitled to your own feelings. You don't need me to bring up a feeling for you to have a feeling, you have to own your own experience."

Then when we went out, he was confident again, present, and I totally wanted him. He [teased me about this and I called him out, then he apologized]. And we just got right back to it. We had a fun night and by the end, I totally wanted him again. And we had great sex and even better sex in the morning twice. I got to watch him in the mirror which turns me on. We were cuddling, loving towards each other.

I advocated for myself from a place of increased differentiation, and I prioritized my own needs despite my socialization, past relationship history, defenses, and associated anxiety even when confronted by his desire. I was facing a pattern I had in nearly every past relationship, putting my issues aside to take care of my partner, but I did not fall back on my old way of being; even though it terrified me to try new ways to engage. I was convinced that if I ignored his needs and advocated for myself he would reject me and I would lose him, but I did it anyway, multiple times. I continued to take up space until I felt better, something I do not recall ever doing in relation to sex and insecurity. I then processed the experience related to self-attachment:

November 9, 2020-D, cont. As for my insecurity it was weird... it's like the difference between needing and wanting. What I needed was to deal with my insecurity for myself. What I wanted was for him to reassure me. And that's what made a difference because in the past I would've needed him to reassure me, and he would've failed and that would've sucked. In this case I just wanted him to focus on me and he couldn't and that was all right because I didn't need him to do it. So that's where not being dependent is helpful, where autonomy is helpful.

You know, when the situation above was happening and he was like “what do I need to do to get you in the mood.” And I think right there was pressure. What if I don’t want to be in the mood? What if I change my mind? That’s fine. It doesn’t have to be your way, doesn’t have to be my way either but certainly I’m not going to have sex if I’m not feeling like it. And that’s the thing. That has to be OK. It wasn’t how do I/we convert my feelings so that you get to fuck me. It was I don’t feel like having sex right now. It doesn’t even have to be insecurity. It could’ve just been like, I’m not feeling like it. And I guess in part that’s what I said to him. Not exactly.

This is me confirming that I have a right to say “no” for any reason, which I know logically, but actually implementing it is new for me. Followed by my related insecurity around if he wanted me for me, but still, I did not give in!

November 9, 2020-D, cont. I think underneath that I was feeling insecure. I was worrying about M just using me for sex, and being objectified. I was worried about him being on a train of just being a sex god, needing to have sex and I was the most convenient one. I was feeling like it wasn’t really me. And then was it, is it really me? So I know I turn him on. And I know I did that day because he told me ...

... and I will tell him about getting dressed up. That putting in the effort helps. Maybe I don’t need to judge that. Maybe I don’t need to say ‘but that’s shallow’. Maybe it’s just how I’m wired. I like to be the center of attention. I like to have somebody put effort in for me. I like to be admired and I like to be able to admire. I think that’s more honest. I’m going to try that, thanks

My confidence after such a success would soar, I was facing my self-objectification and suppressed desires and *putting them out there* like a boss! It was like I was a dragon again... I

was powerful and strong!

When I felt the confidence of exposing and combatting my self-objectification, I would have moments that felt like I had stumbled upon a profound and transformative realization, like I had figured everything out. “I have found the answer! And now I am invincible!” Then, very soon after overcoming something through bravery and celebrating my transformative power, I would crash, feel confused, anxious, and insecure. In my insecurity, I would try to find problems with or judge myself and the person I was seeking to engage with more intimately. In this next installment, I map out figuratively all the “problems” I try to create:.

November 12, 2020, ...here we are at Panthera 7 AM and I was thinking about M and what’s missing, or what I want but I’m not getting. Or something like that. I thought about Owl “take what you get” and I thought “wait a minute, perhaps that means ‘enjoy what you have’. ... When you have something, embrace it for what it actually is. And don’t wish for something different. Don’t be eating a mouse and thinking “gosh I wish I had a rabbit!” Or like me, thinking “how can I turn this mouse into a rabbit?” Well I can’t.

This feels really, really relevant in so many ways. One in relation to discernment, which we’ve talked about before. Specifically, I’m thinking that Owl doesn’t catch and eat a Mouse and in the middle of that think “I wonder what my next mouse will be, I wonder what would’ve happened if I missed this mouse, I wonder if this mouse really wanted to be caught. I wonder if I’ll be able to hold onto this mouse while I’m eating it. What would happen if I paused for a minute or I put it aside for a minute, because I was full? Would she run away? Did this mouse want to be caught? Is this mouse lying to me? Is this mouse wishing she was with another owl? Am I doing enough to be worthy of this

mouse? What can I learn from this mouse to help me catch another one or how is this mouse like the last one? How is she different? Should I be worried that this mouse is too much like the last one? Is this mouse really what she says she is? Do I want this mouse? Do I even like mice? Maybe this mouse isn't good enough for me. Should I let this mouse go and look for another one? Should I double down and get another mouse in case this one starts to bore me? Will I ever catch another? Should I/how can I hold onto this one? Am I interesting enough for this mouse? How can I entertain this mouse so that she will enjoy being eaten? Am I as good a mouse catcher/holder/eater as other owls that have caught mice? Why doesn't this mouse make me feel better about eating it? Why isn't this mouse complimenting me more? Maybe this mouse isn't really into me! What should I do so this mouse will be more into me?" It makes me laugh just thinking about it! It's madness. Take what you catch and enjoy it. If you don't enjoy it, be discerning next time, and if all else fails and it's rotten, drop it and fly away. Somebody else will eat it.

And to be whole, I should also be thinking about this from Mouse perspective. Because I'm prey also. Does Mouse think "What can I do to be caught and entice Owl to hunt me?" "Why is it that every time Owl has caught me before they let me escape? Why didn't they fight for me?" "Am I good enough? What should I do to be good enough to be caught and eaten? Maybe I'm too old, maybe my fur isn't fluffy enough, maybe I'm too skinny, maybe I look worn out. Maybe I should make it easier to catch me, let myself lounge out in the sun in owl territory." "Oh no I've been caught! What if the owl doesn't find me tasty enough? What should I be or do to be more delicious and enticing to Owl? Do I look fat? Maybe she won't want to eat me. Then I'll be worthless. I should probably just stay quiet. And let her have her way with me." "Why is Owl so focused on herself?

Shouldn't she be paying more attention to me? Am I not important enough to Owl? Why isn't Owl interested in what I think or what I have to say?"

No, Mouse doesn't think this way, she goes about her business. Yes, I know she worries about being caught, but only when she senses danger. Otherwise she's doing Mouse shit. She's not obsessing about her captor. Or why she hasn't been caught. Or what she needs to do to get caught. And to be kept. No.

... And also, taking what you get in relation to relationship, instead of thinking "gosh, I wish he was like he was in the beginning, more attentive or prioritizing me" I could be looking at what he is providing, and really revel in that. And if there comes a time when that's not enough, or I want something different or more, I can expand. I can augment. Or I could leave.

When I consider myself as predator or prey, I can see that regardless of the position, I still need to be focused on myself and my experience. But instead, I am worrying about other; from this angle, it feels especially ridiculous. I can also witness how anxious I actually am, as all of those questions are things I regularly was asking myself. So, after spending this time convincing myself that perhaps my insecurity is misplaced, I then start to downplay my fears. It may feel good in the moment to dismiss my concerns as silly, but it is confusing when thinking about developing trust and confidence with myself. Who should I believe? Which part? Which interpretation? I believe I am getting clarity as I dig deeper:

November 12, 2020 cont., In the end, I'm spending too much time thinking about this, and I'd like to understand that a little bit more so I'm going to ask the woods today and let you know ...

The first thing that comes up is that I'm focusing on him to deflect from focusing

on myself. And then I'm doing a "take what you get" justification and trying to "improve/grow." Maybe growing is fine but the focus on improvement regarding changing is not. Because I spend time alone and I'm bored. Instead of sitting in that discomfort, and then doing something about it, I'm deflecting and focusing on him. And how to change him. So it's like that same thing we watch couples do all the time, "I'm not going to own my own experience I'm just going to try to change how you act so that I can feel better about myself or so I'm contained or expansive or whatever" fuck that. Like, "if only I could understand him, then I can understand myself" and what is that!? That's bananas.

Here's the thing, Rachel, this guy is a sex god, and he's fun, he's not a super deep soul I don't think, not that he doesn't have the capacity for it but this is not where he's at right now. Also, if Owl is not getting what she wants from her mate, she moves on. Owl isn't like 'oh I should make sure my mate feels important and listen to some boring stories' no, Owl is like '... I'm not here to help you feel good about yourself just like you're not here to help me feel good about myself.'

So just enjoy the sex and the fun and the escapism and the creativity. That's all it is. It's not a life partner, it's not a future husband, it's not security. It's just embracing life and having fun and enjoying somebody and something and also enjoying yourself! And pushing yourself to expand, the more you seek to compete with him or try to get your voice heard the more you're finding your voice!

It's an opportunity. It doesn't have to be more than that, in fact it can't be more than that, because we have no idea about the future, it's totally uncertain. So stop trying to control, change, influence or analyze it, remember you can't think your way into the

future. You've got to Be your way into yourself and Be your way into now. The Now is where it's at! It's the only place we can truly engage in our life.

After attempting to convince myself to not take him very seriously, I also indirectly acknowledge my insecurity and ways that I am changing in an effort to appease him. This is another attempt at staying in my integrity and thus being trustworthy. I have come full circle from Being, to fear, to bravery, to thinking, to self-soothing, and back to Being in this one walk.

The next day I am back trying to solidify my identity by accepting I am a liquid:

November 13, 2020, I had an upsetting interaction with M ... It wasn't a bad interaction or upsetting, it just turned up some feelings, and that's fine. Anyway, I'm just doing a lot of thinking about how I show up in the world, and how I flow around other people. I don't know if I'm flowing. Or if I get stopped up, or if I'm just evaporating. I am adapting, that's for sure. And then it's like I over adapt but maybe when I think about it like water, maybe the thing to remember is that ... I can adapt while still maintaining my molecules. And maybe that's part of what's happening with the evaporating or with getting stuck in eddies. Maybe I'm just forgetting that I'm water.

And so if I were to think like water I would go with the flow of us happening, but stay *as* water, is that just grounding? Maybe it's just that I need to keep flowing so maybe then getting stuck is me not flowing, because I'm afraid of losing myself or evaporating, I resist. And maybe I don't need to resist, maybe I could just flow right past whatever the objects are, in this case people ... and maybe that's what I need to do. As I'm saying this the rain is starting [no, Magick, Jesus.] And maybe I also have to understand that even if I did evaporate I would become a cloud again and then I would rain just like I'm doing now, so I'm safe no matter what.

So now I just have to decide what I want to do or how I want to be. Or I have to understand that if I truly accept my water nature I can't actually make those decisions upfront. I have to just do it when it happens. Maybe trying to experiment or change shit, is just resisting what is, versus just remembering while I'm in it, that I'm still here and that I don't need to resist.

Water doesn't try to move rocks all at once, water wears away rocks, water is constant, water flows, don't try to move rocks Rachel. Don't try to wear away mountains. Just flow ... stop resisting. Maybe ... I might just flow right past it ... I might just be like, you know, I'm not feeling it . Because I'm not feeling it. And that's maybe part of it, maybe part of it is just listening to myself and not stopping myself from going with my nature...

The less I resist my nature and the more I engage with my nature the less I'm going to try to control other things and the less disappointed and upset I'm going to be at other people and other things that don't go my way. I just have to remember that I have a choice about all of this and each choice comes with its own benefits and consequences and as long as I respect that, see that, know that, Be that, I'm free. And that's what we want, freedom. The rain is coming down harder. I need to focus. Thank you woods.

Thank you rain.

I am exploring the idea that maybe my identity will not be a solid form. If I see myself as water, I recognize myself; and if I accept myself as water I need to remember the power of water, it's adaptability, and it's strength, not just the fleeting, changing nature of it. I argue that if I can accept and Be who and what I am, I may lose people. However, I will have found me, and I am the only person who matters and who I should focus my Being efforts on. Resisting is stopping

my flow. I need to let go of feeling like I need to change others and focus on my own decisions and related personal responsibility if I want to be empowered and free.

Over the next week I cycle through my usual process of engaging, self-soothing, feeling empowered, and falling into anxiety again, but at some point, instead of analyzing, I reframe my perspective and start to allow myself to focus on, enjoy and experience what is. My reality of what is, at least in the sexual realm, leaves me in a state of euphoria.

November 20, 2020, My woods-walk today has been delayed because I have a date with C. Talking to FJ however, we explored how I'm discovering that it's not so much an obsession with M that I have, but rather sexual expansion. I've spent my whole life trying to contain this energy. I spent my whole life not allowing myself to feel pleasure. And now I'm feeling it in ways that are unimaginable. It is very childlike in that I'm going in with my eyes wide open and I am without words, without really knowing or understanding the language. Just diving in and exploring. It's as if it's before I learned all of the social construct messages that this is bad or wrong or that I'm not worthy. I feel like I'm going to burst. Joy and pleasure.

FJ shared this idea about not pathologizing—not looking at things as if they were symptoms; but rather to view things as symbols. And I love that because it's really aligned with all that I've been doing around [not seeing everything as problems but rather] using everything. I am curious. I am in a realm without words, without reason, without thinking, without limits. I'm grateful to have M with me, but it's OK if that doesn't last. Because I'll never go without this again. I will never be without again.

Also this morning when we were having sex, I was looking at my Divine feminine bear crow wolf mouse owl [painting], and I could swear she was like “fuck

yes!” My body is absolutely amazing. The things that it can do and feel are shocking. And fucking awesome, epically, epically awesome. I will no longer live in shame about my body.

Also! I keep trying to use words and reason and analysis to describe something that is indescribable. I keep trying to make sense of or meaning out of this experience, when those things have no place here. This is all about experiencing. This is all about pleasure. This is all about expansion. I do not need to know why, what, how, when. In fact, there’s no space for it. Just like being in the woods. And maybe that’s the answer.. This resurgence of groundedness, clarity, and power, focused on and accepting of myself and experiencing versus worrying would last for a varying degree of time, and then the loop would begin again.

Spiraling Downward

Over the next couple of weeks, I let down my guard. I allowed myself to feel closer to M and start to trust him. Things were amazing when we were together, but when we were apart I would again become preoccupied with him and lose myself. My insecurity would come back, and I would struggle with it; trying to maintain the feeling of closeness and excitement and downplay the fear and sadness that would bubble up:

November 29, 2020, I believe I’ve said here before, several times, that I continue to focus a huge bulk of my attention and thoughts on M. It was sex for a while, still is. But also, just thinking about him and our relationship and if I like him more than he likes me blah blah blah. This is very frustrating. I haven’t been able to create much. Music, yes. I haven’t been able to paint for a while now. I have my Bear Divine Feminine; I just can’t paint her. Like I’m worried about it or something? Can’t isn’t the right word, I have not

been able to get myself to do it in a way that feels genuine.

Anyway this is all basically about me wondering about my attachment stuff. And trying to figure out how to redirect my thoughts in a way that feels, I don't know, respectful to my process? Not too heavy? I'm not even obsessing negatively, it's just thinking about him, constantly thinking about him.

And I know it's not him. It can't be right? Because it's great. We have such a great time together, the sex is amazing, I really like him a lot. I'm totally falling for him. I can't even explain how much fun we have together. It's just joy. And so I'm, like, binging on joy. We definitely had a binge this last week....five days. And each day and night was fucking amazing. And he started to, I guess he always has, in offhand ways, talk about the future, and I get so excited about that. And then I get sad, like my heart drops, and I get fearful... [and become] this little girl who's always been disappointed by empty promises. The future, it's a fantasy that's being spun. But in the moment it's so good. He's really caring; it's his masculine energy also that I'm binging on. Just not having to be the one that drives things.

We get to be animals together. The more I'm an animal, the happier I am, the more I try to suppress my animal nature, and go into a mind place, the more unhappy I am. I want to live like an animal, that means not thinking. I get to do that with him, and it's fucking great. So now I have to figure out how to do it with me. Just be an animal on my own. Maybe that's part of it, maybe I'm scared to do that, let myself be in an animal place alone, as if I feel like that's unsafe. Look into that.

So anyway, yeah this might be the honeymoon period. I guess I'm just going to enjoy it for all it is. I just want to make sure that I'm not getting lost in the meantime.

And it feels that way. Like I don't want to be alone. Like I want him around.

I was glad when he left yesterday morning, then I didn't know what to do with myself, until JK [my friend] got here... we went on an epic hike. Which was awesome. Then MK came over ... Then at 3:30, I hung out with [a few new friends], we got completely shitfaced. I passed out on the couch at 9 o'clock. I just didn't want to be alone. I want to embrace my "alone." I'm not alone, because I am here.

After five straight days together, when I am finally alone, I try to maintain my sense of self, my confidence and integrity, and my excitement about the relationship, but I am spiraling. I want to stay in the unthinking "animal" mind of just experiencing, but I find that I do not feel safe being that "exposed" alone. With my anxiety increasing, I "act out" in a way that felt old, familiar, and disappointing: drinking heavily, binging on people, struggling with being alone. I then start to... I don't know, realize I am in a fantasy world? Or just trying to get some distance, pushing him away?

November 29, 2020 cont., It's like I'm losing my sense of self, like I'm only myself with him. And that's bullshit, because I'm not fully myself with him. I'm only part of myself with him. I don't enjoy doing stuff I need to be doing...I'm not reading or expanding my mind or, I mean I guess that's all fine because I don't really want to be in my mind I want to be experiencing, which is probably why I think about him a lot because when I'm with him I'm really experiencing shit. I guess maybe I just don't know what to do with myself that feels authentic?

I did some authentic movement yesterday that was amazing, if I wasn't so drunk I would have a recording of it. But I didn't do that. Anyway I loved that, I will do some more of that. Body stuff. Not mind stuff. And not watching TV to turn off my mind stuff

either. And I'm drinking to turn off my mind stuff. I'm prioritizing myself now. I'm not going to be afraid to lose him or lose my feelings about him. I'm going to be totally present when I'm with him and totally present with myself and with me. That's my call to action this week.

It is all jumbled and confusing. I continue to try to stay positive and try new things, but on this day, my insecurity appears to be winning the battle. The more I process, the less trustworthy and confident I feel. The pep talk seemed to have worked temporarily, but I am assuming that since the below is from the same day, I started obsessing about him again.

November 29, 2020 cont. I read a bunch of old texts from M and me, and noticed the difference in how we interact with each other ... I was clearly standing alone. I was self-contained. And I haven't been since we started having sex. So I did an "M Fast" today, and realized just how much I'm thinking about this person. And I don't think it's him. I don't understand why I can't stop thinking about him. It's very disturbing.

This evening I *felt* less, after doing some painting today, but my thoughts are negative. Like doing this distancing, I integrate not just skepticism but negative intent. I don't need to do that. I have to focus on my stuff. I think I'm using him as a distraction. I think I'm losing myself in what I wanted for so long. I also am thinking about the usual fears: I have more feelings for him than he does for me, I'm fantasizing making some attempts at keeping him, feeling a sense of ownership. I fear that he'll grow tired of me... Maybe I need to try to compartmentalize more? How would that work? I don't know how to navigate so much of this.

Addicted. How do you break an addiction? I have to quit for a few days. See if it's possible. But again, I really don't think it's him. But I really want to understand what it

is, because I don't want to ruin this. And I don't want to be wasting all this time thinking about this man. Especially at the expense of myself.

After recognizing that I am behaving in ways I do not like, I try to figure out how to try something different to win myself back and calm my anxiety.

The next day I continue to spiral down and pop back up. I go down the anxiety insecurity hole and then use the animals and my mission to maintain my self-focus, to try to keep myself together. I do believe I am being honest with myself here though, and I am not allowing myself to blindly behave from my defenses. This is progress from my former way of using fear and denial to allow for undermining behavior:

December 1, 2020 -D, Definitely experiencing some identity issues. I mean nothing is definite right? Let's try again. Right now it seems as though I'm experiencing some identity issues. Which I think is a deflection from boredom, lack of focus, avoidance, winter, Covid, isolation, recent divorce, changes, lifestyle. I mean, does the "why" really help? A second ago I said "Owl, in trying to be like you..." and a large bird, I could swear an owl, flew out up in the trees in the back part of Panthera.

Trying to be like Owl, I'm finding a lot of anxiety is coming up. I'm finding a lot of obsessive thoughts. And I was thinking, this feels like identity in that I'm allowing my identity to be subsumed by this M relationship. ... And maybe this is just my conditioning. Randomly, when my mind is quiet, I start going off on flights of fancy about forever and marriage and ownership and fear of loss ... I'm finding it harder and harder to [focus on myself]. When you think about insecure attachment, this all makes sense, right? So I gotta double down and focus on myself. And I think that that might mean limiting my time with him, which kind of sucks because I'm really enjoying it a lot.

But after reading parts of our early text history yesterday, and how independent I was, and how much he pursued me, let's be honest, I feel like... like I don't want to play games, and ... part of me is saying, "well, he'll pursue you more if you're more independent" but it's not even about him pursuing me! Even though I keep saying that to myself. It's about my independence. It's about my being dependent on myself and feeling confident. It's about my not falling into this conditioned bullshit that I need to be dependent on him to continue to get what I want from him, the opposite of what is actually required here. And even if it's not, I have no interest in being dependent...

I was wondering here if I was following an oppressive script, something like: "to get a man to stay with you and love you, you should be dependent on them so they feel important, needed, competent, protective." I do not recall doing this in past relationships; it feels very 1950s, and I wonder if it is because I finally feel small with someone and perhaps I want to be found, held, and saved. I see I am sublimating myself while putting him on a pedestal, to bolster his ego, and I recognize this will not work and is not healthy. I also catch myself trying to figure out how to manipulate him by attempting to increase his anxiety to get more attention.

December 1, 2020 -D, cont. It may be as simple as just being consciously aware each time I reach for him, I need to be reaching for me [holy shit three deer, that was amazing.] so, let's see the deer as a symbol, and let's view this dependency as a symbol, not as a symptom. I am falling back into an old script and that script will not define me, I will define me. And I need to be patient with myself and understand that I'm automatically going to do this, and that's OK, I just ... can't be subsumed by the script. I'm writing a new one. ... as I'm saying that, a Blue Jay is calling and now she stopped. So Blue Jay is another symbol, let's look her up.

I also want to note that I was looking at a video last night that I did on October 11. Which is the day after we first had sex. And I noticed then that I was already starting to obsess and that was just the beginning. It hasn't stopped since then, that's fucking boring Rachel. No offense, I'm not trying to be a dick, but it's been what, six weeks of sex, and this man is like the center of your being? No, he is not.

I am starting to get frustrated with myself here. I demand that I embrace my independence for myself—not so he will want me more—and I also demand I stop acting in this way that feels “crazy” while also recognizing that my defenses are still fighting back and I have to work to not self-sabotage. I struggle to navigate my feelings of desire for M. I struggle with wanting him to comfort and reassure me, while I am also feeling like I am losing myself:

December 1, 2020 -D cont., Also, all this while you're thinking about how you can get him to be more reassuring to you. How to get him to focus more on you. How you can lure him in or engage him more or get him to be more reassuring, and that's dangerous. Because you're relying on him, then, to build your confidence. You're relying on him to define things. You're relying on him to define you. And how you should be, and how you should act, and how you should feel. Fuck no. This shows up in places that you're not even noticing. For instance it shows up when you're saying things like “I wonder if M would like this” versus “do I like this?”

... Meanwhile, you're also seeing parts of yourself in him. This ... is the typical two people become one bullshit. N. O. Those parts of him that I love, those are mine, he can have them too... It's not a competition. I will be my whole self. I guess I just don't know who that whole self is without all the anxiousness and pain and misery. And victimhood. That's why I have to try a bunch of shit out. And that's the fun of it isn't it?

So let's reconnect to some creativity shall we? I'm not falling into this old shit.

I continue to refocus on myself. I am giving myself a lot of attention, but it is not enough. It rarely seems to make a dent on my anxiety unless I am also getting external attention. Lurking right below the surface is my socialization, my self-objectification, and my struggle to accept my sexual desires, which are based on themes of victimhood, misogyny, and oppression. I then work to self-soothe and accept myself without judgement:

December 1, 2020 -D cont., I should also note that I've been obsessing about my body, eating, aging, all the old "feminine" programming. Even looking at our sex video I just focus on my body and where I don't like it. Or sometimes where I did like it, critiquing, but mostly where he might like it or not like it. WTF. Versus how fucking hot it is, how much I was enjoying it, how much he was enjoying it, just remembering how it feels. I did some of that last part. But mostly I was looking at myself [and criticizing]

Last night it was very clear to me that what I liked about the sex videos were just how dirty they were. How "bad" they were. I really, really like being bad. And I'm going to claim that shit. He can't just have it. I'm going to say a whole bunch of dirty shit. Whatever I want. Whatever turns me on. I'm going to do whatever I want, whatever turns me on. I'm also going to accept and fully embrace and advocate for the things that turn me on, even if that's [acting out] little girl or dirty teenager or helpless victim. So there.

As I'm thinking about how empowered I feel actually talking about this, I'm also noticing a few things. One, I'm noticing that I'm not obsessing about him anymore. That part of me is trying to get me to focus on him but another part of me is like "no, not doing that."

I'm also noticing that I fell into the trap of only wanting to talk about 'other'.

Remember when I was talking about how women are only allowed to focus on relationship, looks, children, domestic accomplishments, and tasks, etc.? ...And I start to wonder if it's because that's what we're allowed or expected? Or is it that it's what we actually want? Or is it that the programming tells us that's what we want, we don't explore other options, and then it falls right into place into how we behave. Either way, this is the stuff that's interesting to me. And also, the woods. And also, expansion. Which I guess is connected to both.

I process through some of my self-objectification and socialization to try to remind myself that I am seeking to act in ways that counteract my conditioning. I promise myself that I will own my "badness" (I do not). I did not claim my desire or share my "dirty" thoughts with M. To the day I am writing this (8 months into our sexual relationship) I remain near silent, which continues to disappoint me. I fully believe M would accept and go with whatever way I wanted to play things, but no matter how confident I may feel before, as soon as we start engaging sexually, I cannot get myself to actively play a role. All I can manage is passive victim.

I start to clear my mind, and the more empowered I feel the less I focus on him, and this feels freeing. Then, a new anxiety picks up:

December 1, 2020 -D cont., When I do feel clear headed, part of me whispers something about how if I'm clear headed, I'm not going to like him. I'm not going to be interested in this relationship. Maybe that anxiety is coming from the part of me that thinks I need a man to survive. Which I clearly absolutely do not need. In any way. And so I say to that part of myself, "I hear you, I see you, I understand that you're scared, I understand that you've been programmed to believe this, but it's not true. You don't need anybody but yourself. And he is some nice cake, yum yum. Just don't eat too much, not because of

your thighs, but because cake doesn't have any nutritional value, gives you a headache, and is best served one slice at a time." [In summary:] The first M Fast was a success. We might need to do it more, and by more I mean every week, maybe 3 times a week. You have to overcome these scripts!

In those two walks in the woods in one day, I processed through my identity, oppressive norms, self-soothing, and projection, several times in fact. I took cues from the animals regarding how I felt and my identity, and I considered, set up, and pursued new experiments—all ways to develop trust and confidence despite my fear and confusion. I also tried to self-soothe instead of criticizing. The process felt great, empowering, centering and terrifying.

December 2, 2020- D, M was over last night. He was in a difficult place due to some work stress. And I felt like caring for him. Which I did. It felt good. it didn't feel gendered. And we had great fucking sex. Twice (then once this morning of course). And I definitely claimed my wanting. And he claimed his.

And Rachel, we have nothing to worry about. When it comes to having our own identity, and taking space for ourselves, and not focusing on him, never worry about that. The lust you feel comes right back. The trust you feel comes right back. The joy you feel comes right back. Being in the now is easy. You're his equal. He's your equal. It's all good.

...we did talk about [an incident that happened two nights prior when I went out with some new friends and was surprised by an unwanted kiss and unwanted sexual attention afterwards] And he got very possessive and angry and upset. [We explored some reasons why] And I get it. He was really angry, not just because somebody violated someone that was "his" (me) but also because he called [the uninvited kiss] an act of

violence. And he was surprised by my minimizing of it. And I did a lot of thinking and some sharing around my conditioning: Deescalate. That's what you do when somebody gets aggressive with you sexually. Deescalate, and don't provoke anymore. Meaning, make yourself smaller and nonthreatening. WTF.

He was really upset that I had no outrage, that it was like I was defending her. And I thought back to all the other times where I've done that. Even this time where I thought "well, I provoked her" And I did provoke her, but that didn't give her a right to put her tongue in my mouth. That didn't give her the right to send me texts that were inappropriate. Even if she said they weren't for me. I don't know what to do with it. I do know that if it was a man, I would've done the same thing, I would've tried to deescalate it by being non-threatening. And not bruising the ego. ...Also I really want to be [friends with this group of people]. And I don't want to make trouble. So I'm going to put up with the fact that she put her tongue in my mouth during a pandemic? Even if we were completely shitfaced. It's crossing a line...

This experience was very familiar. I did not even consider that an unwanted sexual advance could be considered crossing a boundary let alone be an act of violence.

December 2, 2020- D cont., ... I find it interesting my reaction to [the unwanted sexual advance], by how many times in my past I've done the same thing: try to figure out why it was my fault. And minimize it. And how many times it was minimized by others. How many times have I heard "oh you're blowing this out of proportion" or "I didn't mean anything, don't be so sensitive" or "don't overreact, I just wanted to kiss you, besides you asked for it" it saddens me, that I needed a man's outrage to even start to consider these things. I had minimized it to just a little bit of fun. I didn't even think about it being

unsafe due to the pandemic. And I didn't even think about how it was disrespectful to me either.

I was not at all surprised by my reaction, or lack thereof. I was also not surprised by what I did with the experience instead of being outraged:

December 2, 2020- D cont., Also, I do wonder if I sent him those detailed texts to make him jealous. And I mean, of course I did. And that wasn't a good idea. Also, it feels a little bit sad that you think that your main value is being wanted by others. I mean we know this is part of the challenge here, but that's what you're using, you're seeing that you're wanted by others, and you're showing him that you're wanted by others in an attempt to, what, show your value? make him hold onto you tighter? That's fucked up. So watch out for your manipulations, maneuvers. They may backfire, and they are unnecessary anyway.

As expected, I had not only dismissed the violation, I also had to admit to myself that I thought I could use the texts I received as a way of showing my value to M, to make him jealous. This is young, manipulative, sabotage behavior, and passive-aggressive victim behavior, and it backfired. Once I work through M's reactions and explore and confront how my socialization shows up when I am actually threatened, I go back into my taboo desires:

December 2, 2020-D cont., On a separate note, I'm also working through some of the things about my desire and proclivities. I talked to M a little bit about the dominance thing. And that just asking me to submit is not enough. To be dominant you have to threaten and/or have something to back up the threat. And he is still a little uncomfortable with that ... Anyway, it's interesting thinking about it because right now it's not so much submission as it is allowing myself to have pleasure, and he's very polite. And he waits

and asks and wants to make sure I'm enjoying it and all the things one would want to be able to expect, that are reasonable expectations, but have not nearly been the case [in my past experience]. And so it's like wanting him to not do that, but with my permission. Wanting him to take what he wants, wanting to feel like I'm irresistible, and/or that he just doesn't care about my needs and only cares about his own, that's what I like to play with, and you can see why right? It's owning it. If that is the actual truth then be the actual truth. ... at least it's interesting from a gendered perspective, and self-objectification.

I mean, would I like to be able to just freely enjoy sex that is given to lovingly and passionately? Yes. Am I doing that? Yeah for the most part. Does it matter that I want to play with these past traumas? Probably not. But it is interesting.

And I think I also want to see how dark he can get. How bad he can get. How much he can admit to as a man. He's getting good at showing it. And thank God, because [past experience had been that people I was with preferred not to explore the darker aspects of sex] Like dude, embrace your shadow. Be bad. So as I'm saying that, I realized I should be saying that to me. Because I'm the only one that's important here. I wanted others to [be perverted] because I felt like if they didn't do it, I couldn't do it ... And in a lot of ways that felt very true to me. I don't know if it was true. But it certainly felt that way. Because each time I tried to be bad, ["bad" actions would be rejected or de-escalated]. And I want to be able to admit to human feelings, and explore them, be curious about them. I don't want to suppress them. I don't want to hide them; I don't want them to live in shame inside of me. Fuck that. I think this is the—or at least one of the—paths towards wholeness.

I have a real-life incident where my boundaries are not respected, and I seek to use it to manipulate my partner instead of advocating for myself. Then I dive into an exploration of how I want to be sexually dominated and “taken,” as long as I control the narrative. The narrative I have is that as a man, M just wants to use me anyway, so he may as well admit it. The idea that perhaps he is not just using me, perhaps he really does want closeness too sometimes, never even crosses my mind. When he tries to tell me that it is more than just sex, I assume he is just in denial; somehow him wanting to connect is even more of a threat—perhaps because that is what I want too?

I am not in a position to recognize what may be the underlying threat; instead, I insist that as long as we are honest about our feelings and take intentional steps, like consensual non-consent, I can accept what I view as the reality of this situation. However, that acceptance is framed as if I am in a position of power. Am I? In theory, I get to decide and advocate for what I want, even if what I want is to be victimized; thus creating a situation where I get to feel pleasure, but I do not have to be responsible for my desire. This is similar to wanting my partner to embrace their “badness,” so I can enjoy that perversion without having to admit to or embrace my own. All the while, I am frustrated that I struggle to communicate. I also feel angry that people in my past were not able to accept their shadow when I was doing the same and was completely unaware of my hypocrisy. This makes sense based on my sexual history and socialization: women are not supposed to experience pleasure, so we do not learn how to identify what we want. We just learn to submit to others. It makes sense, yet it is not acceptable now.

I need to find the bravery I need to communicate. I have some ideas! As for shadow, I do not really get to be angry at M for not owning his shadow. He is happy to play with whatever fantasy I throw at him without question, so instead of being frustrated I am finding myself

enjoying the sex more and more while vicariously experiencing myself losing my sense of self:

December 3, 2020, walking at Panthera at sunrise this morning on our way back ... I was talking about how I was folding my identity into this relationship, as I've been trying not to do. Still ... it's not an excuse... I'm just explaining what's happening ... Anyway I was saying that within this relationship I'm struggling to understand my identity, what it's about and then finally, "is who I am—my identity, how I'm showing up in the world—enough?" and so I asked myself: "enough for what? Enough for me to not be bored? Maybe a little bit. Enough for me to be interesting? No. Enough for me to be satisfied? Maybe a little bit. Enough that I can justify my use of resources? Yes, that's part of it." Then finally, "Enough that I can fulfill my purpose, whatever that might be." And that made me pause.

Here I am with my survival needs met. So now I'm focused on thriving and purpose. I used to think that my purpose was helping others to alleviate unnecessary suffering. And I guess I need to revisit that. Because it still sounds right. I'm not sure. All this work in the woods, I keep thinking the answer lies in embracing my animal nature. And I know, there's more than that.

My concern about being "enough" was not just about purpose here, it was about being enough to continue to be accepted. I was worried that I was boring and not offering enough to hold onto my man.

December 3, 2020, cont. ... but if the trees don't need me, and the animals don't need me, and nobody in my life needs me, aside from me, and I'm giving myself everything that I need, right? Then what?

So I guess in a way my passion has been diverted into sex. And that makes sense. At the same time, I don't want to lose sight of discovery. I haven't lost sight of the woods, that's for sure. So I haven't been as present lately. But I know the importance of being in the woods for me. For my mental health and for my ability to thrive ... to experience things from a grounded place of love. Can I just be Woods, spirit, sex, art, play, friendship, love? Can I make a contribution to society or is it a lost cause?

My [healthy] ego is just not awake, or at least it's diverted into self-objectification bullshit. And there we are again. Falling back into that trap. Am I wanted enough? Am I sexy enough? Do I have value? Am I interesting enough? So this is another indication that I need to focus on my dissertation and getting other shit done for me including my license to practice. So that needs to be your focus, Rachel! Let your ego [focus on getting things done professionally]. And let's give this sweet little body a break [from the mental abuse].

As part of my continued exploration of identity I start to wonder who I am if no one needs me. Without being needed, being interesting, or being useful, who am I? If I am just living to experience versus giving to others, can I justify my use of natural resources? I revisit this idea in February as I am also musing about how to navigate my identity issues around knowledge, which comes up a lot with M given how much information he retains:

February 22, 2021, ...There's nothing unique about intellectualizing, maybe you're better at it than others, better at retention and [recall] but that's not really unique, that's not really who you are, is it? It's just somebody else's ideas. I'm just not impressed by that. It's what you do with that knowledge right? If you have it ... what do you create, what do you feel, what makes you unique and irreplaceable? What justifies your use of resources?

And how are you bringing love to the world? These are my values of course. And I think they should be considered of equal value to the value of intellect. It takes all kinds, right?

And I think intellect is not inherently oppressive, but I think academics [uses intellect to] contribute to oppression ... through maintaining the system that's oppressive, that says you're better than other people if you are smarter or more educated. That gives you status and elevates you. It gives you more privilege to be heard, to be believed, to have power and even if you "use that power for good" aren't you doing that from a place of privilege that doesn't really understand the experience of the "less fortunate"? And aren't you just another missionary? Trying to control and improve for money, power, fame? It's not black-and-white but it sure as hell should be taken into consideration. The crows are waiting for me to feed them. I also saw a turkey on the way home.

I am indirectly working through my insecurity around my intelligence and ego here, which I explore elsewhere in relation to M. Can I be safe if things are imbalanced; e.g., if I am not as "smart" as my partner but embrace my "considered feminine, and thus lesser valued," intuition and feelings? I am not sure, but the idea that I could be valuable just for Being felt important to test out, especially because I was noticing this type of thinking is another oppressive norm I was trying to overcome, as was losing myself by over focusing on M and our relationship:

December 3, 2020, cont. ... And I had another passing thought, which is that maybe ... I don't need to entertain anybody! Imagine that! Maybe my presence is enough. Maybe I don't need to fix anything or help anybody. Maybe this is a place where Owl can help.

Imagine not having to entertain anybody, Rachel. Imagine feeling valuable and loved and secure enough to not feel that you need to perform. Imagine being able to do that, without feeling like you have to be pretty. Or helpful. Or insightful. Or intelligent.

Or sexy. Or meeting somebody else's needs. And imagine that you don't need to be entertained either. Imagine that. Then do it.

Once I had stripped away all of my outmoded ways of interacting: entertaining, caretaking, focusing on other, I was not sure what was left. In fact, I was not sure I had an authentic identity, and how could I? I had rejected all the (many) parts of me that I thought were socially unacceptable and had lived my life focused on navigating the wants and needs of others. Could I embrace this emptiness and see what may come up in place of my outmoded ways of being?

Over the next few days, as our intimacy grew, I set up a drawer for M in my house. I let myself accept that I am falling in love with him. My conversations (notes) to myself are long and alternate between insecurity, overconfidence, confusion, obsessive thoughts (both love and fear), and resolve. I discovered that in some ways, going into what I typically reject is not only expanding, it also helps me tap into desire, love, and joy.

December 8, 2020- D, M was over last night, we had sex in front of the mirror which we have yet to put up. But holy shit. It was totally hot watching him. And then we turned around and I could see me? Oh my God! I can't believe how hot I was. I mean so sexy, so gorgeous, just so happy. So excited! So filled with desire! So into it. Like an animal but like a gorgeous animal. I didn't look at my flaws very much, I'll tell you that much! This seems like something to celebrate ... How can it be that almost every time it's better than the last but each time is so fucking awesome?

And then later on in the evening he was playing some songs from like the 70s. And normally I would've freaked out and either insisted they be turned off or disparaged him. This time I opened up and listened and I swear I tapped into some early erotic memory. And I was so enamored with him. He was singing some cheesy song, totally

into it, and I was watching him and I thought to myself “I love this man” now we know that that’s not strictly speaking, accurate. But in that moment I felt it and it was pretty awesome. ...

And even though [this line of thinking is] focused on him right now, this is about me. This is about me discovering myself. Discovering my desire, what turns me on, that I can enjoy sex like this fully. This is healing. This is growth near transcendence. My old trauma has no place in my present or my future. Also! I forgot to note! When M first came over, we hadn’t talked for almost 24 hours, after a really amazing time together. And I was awkward as usual. And struggling to transition or connect. And he suggested sex, as you can imagine. And I wasn’t sure, but I ended up doing it and that was the best sex of my life. So the sex, is so grounding! It’s so animal! Just amazing. No mind. Body. Reliving the night before, I am feeling elated and in love. I am discovering that going into areas I resist, accepting things I would normally reject and try to change, seems to be treasure troves of rejected desires, and hence areas for expansion, for myself and my relationships. Aligned with my socialization, I hypothesize I am denying myself pleasure by rejecting what actually can bring me joy and feel whole and powerful. Later in the afternoon, I lose all of my confidence, then find myself again...

December 8, 2020- D cont., Afternoon walk at the secret place. I was freaking out about future shit, and worry that M is going to dislike it in the house and be uncomfortable and want to leave, and also [freaking out] that I was uncomfortable and wasn’t sure how I felt. And also feeling like I needed to serve him in some way so [he would stay], etc. etc. bunch of cocoo stuff, not even considering how I was feeling about [him staying at my place for an extended period], which was that it was weird! And that I’m used to the

compartmentalization, so it was strange having him around ...

So here I am in the woods and checking in with myself. The first thing I did was to remind myself to stay in the present, the next thing I did was remind myself that no matter what happens everything is going to be OK. That we have no idea how this is going to end, how it's going to begin, how the middle will look, it doesn't matter.

Then I actually listened to myself a bit and noticed that I was really afraid. So I checked in, reassured myself that it makes sense that I'm scared because relationships end and endings are painful and it makes sense to want to try to avoid that [holy shit what is that it's huge, is that a raven, it's coming back around this way maybe a bald eagle holy crap. Maybe a hawk.]

Anyway [truth is] I wasn't really listening to myself, I was just reassuring myself with a bunch of scripts. Then I said to myself: "I'm not leaving you for him" and this helped me so much, even more than remembering that I can't control anything and that worry is just a waste of time. So I went on "... I'm not leaving you. I'm right here. I'm not leaving you for him, I'm adding him and I'll be here when he's gone." ... That idea itself grounds me but also helps me to focus my attention, and not get drawn into the usual insecure attachment business. That's really what I need to keep in mind and act accordingly ... Just be here now and be with yourself first.

Finishing our walk I remember something ... which is that after this incredible sex, and after feeling totally into him ... we just sleep so ... held and close and he's just really snuggly and huge and just fucking adorable. So I think part of my fear or my obsessing about the future is... not wanting to lose that, feeling so blessed to have him and to have that kind of connection with somebody.

[But then] the fear of losing it just overshadows the joy of having it. And that's not OK with me. I'm not OK with worrying about the future. I'm not OK with that distraction. I'm going to love this. And enjoy it. For as long as I have it. Then when it's over, I have me. What's better than that?

Although I am extremely anxious and insecure, I also feel grounded and brave. Reading through this, I think engaging bravely is another example of doing the opposite of what my defenses and anxiety say and discovering untapped potential and joy. This builds trust and confidence with myself. It took a minute to really listen to myself, but ultimately, I heard myself and did not get caught in the content (my anxiety gathering evidence). Instead, I realized that my anxiety was based on part of me believing that I was abandoning myself. Reassuring myself that I was not losing myself and deciding to be brave was paying off.

December 9, 2020- D I'm at the top of Panthera and I left a sleeping sex god in my bed. He gets a little whiny in the morning, a little grumpy sleepy beariness. It's cute. Yeah I know that's pretty much irrelevant, except for the fact that I left that bed to walk in the woods in the dark [right Madgy?]. Anyway yesterday he was over for day number two ... he ended up working an 11 1/2 hour day. And I was annoyed, which I found interesting. I didn't say anything ... because that annoyance was all about me and my just wanting... connection? Attention? Or just, I had plans that didn't go the way I wanted them to?

Anyway... it was really good, because I got to witness how I hold off on doing things waiting for him, and so I had to force myself to do things. I played guitar for an hour. And I did authentic movement for 20 minutes or so. All the while needing to bring my attention back to myself in my experience, versus worrying about him walking in and seeing me, judging me. Again, obviously not about him but just interesting where my

identity goes and where my actions go.

Instead of being upset at something I could not change and making him feel bad, which affects me, I realized that I was putting my life on hold waiting for him, which felt unacceptable.

However, even when I did engage in something for me, I still externalized my experience, becoming self-conscious about what he may think or feel if he witnessed me and starting to feel shame. This is a very familiar experience, only in the past, I do not recall redirecting my focus to my experience. In this situation I did what felt good anyway, because otherwise I would feel even sillier waiting around for him.

He leaves, and that first day after, I start to spiral. However, this time, when I am feeling at my worst, when I am triggered and in an attachment crisis, I remember what I have been learning and make healthy decisions. I also make mistakes and behave in old ways that hurt. I learn from it, and I am kind and understanding to myself; these “mistakes” are embraced as learning, they do not affect my trust because I am living in integrity with my process.

December 10, 2020, ... yesterday and last night I was again preoccupied with thoughts of M. I was by myself, having a shmoopy day, and bored, but also it turned out I had a pretty bad headache. I just wasn't aware of it until later... Anyway, I did some research on insecure attachment, and disorganized attachment, and how they show up in relationships. And I was like “yeah! That's me, preoccupied! Distrustful! Come and go...” It didn't help just to know that, I already knew that ...

Anyway I went to bed early ... and ... I looked at myself in the mirror, I looked like shit. So tired, my eyes looked terrible, it was clear I was in pain. We talked through what was going on, we talked through solutions, should we ask him to reach out when we're not together? Is it OK to do that? Is that trying to change something that's actually

providing us with an opportunity to feel discomfort? How is it that he's able to be so deeply into me and then not talk to me for 24 hours? Does he ever think about me?

[then responded to myself] I'm thinking about you! Right now, I'm preoccupied with you! I want to know how you are! I find you lovely. You're very special. I love being with you. And every time my mind strayed, I brought it back to myself. I recognize that my preoccupation with M was just a variety of assumptions and fears around him. They were all empty. These thoughts are something that feels out of my control. It just happens automatically and it goes and spirals down to yucky places. 'He's using me. He goes to his car to catch up with other women. He's laughing at me.' So I explored each one. Is he using me for sex? I don't know, am I using him for sex? I mean I'm using him, right? I'm using him to feel good about myself, I'm using him for joy, I'm using him for sex, I'm using him to do nice things for me. So why is it different if he's using me, just because he has the capacity to shut it off? Maybe [that's true] and maybe isn't, but what does that have to do with me?

I watched myself try to find all the ways that he must be doing something hurtful to me, that he must be making a fool out of me...when we're together, it's very clear how he feels but I can't wrap my head around the coming and going. Thinking about it from a disorganized attachment perspective, I understand this is triggering for me. I'm sure my family did this [hot and cold], if they ever even paid attention! More importantly, I'm sure I do this to myself! I pay attention to myself, and then I just go away, as if I don't even matter.

I [then refocused on M] and went back-and-forth about whether or not I should ask M to just text me before going to bed or when he wakes up. I mean, who would that

hurt right? But I was like, ‘that could hurt me! I can’t force him or I don’t want to force him if he doesn’t want to, if he doesn’t think about me.’ And then I was like, ‘well, I change things for him.’ But see we get right back into that old pattern. I don’t want to be a burden, an obligation. I’m not interested in that.

I could probably just check in to see what his process is. So I can clear up any of my assumptions, of which there are many, and they’re all pretty bad. It makes me very uncomfortable. It makes me pull away and shut down and shut off. Like I have to create distance.

If I allow myself to feel secure in myself, I use negative assumptions to help me pull away from him. I consider asking him to reassure me, but I do not want to appear needy. I feel my own reassurance should be enough. I work through taking personal responsibility for my feelings and decisions, not putting them on him, and suggest I check in with him on my assumptions.

December 10, 2020 cont., ... I reminded myself of the work we did yesterday, about walking into discomfort, about that being where the magick is. About that being where my pleasure is. And I thought ... I had totally blocked out that this was a perfect example of where I might be able to walk into discomfort. And still as I’m saying that I think, “but should I just ask him...” You know Rachel. I am here for that. And also this is an experiment. So let’s do an experiment to see if there’s pleasure in this, let’s do an experiment to see if this is where we can grow. It’s obvious that it is, because we’re coming up with all this disorganized and anxious attachment business! This [seeking] soothing [from others] idea. We just got out of that. Any reliance or dependency on another person breeds more reliance or dependency...

I want to highlight that the process I just explained is how I am able to experiment with new

ways of being. Calming my anxious self with “just try it, if it doesn’t work, we can do what feels comfortable to you (even though doing the usual likely results in the usual undesirable outcomes).” I learned this technique through my therapeutic work with couples, which is where I develop or practice many of the processes I describe. Anxiety is mostly impervious to logic, but taking action—trying something and getting proof—can lead to improvement:

December 10, 2020 cont.,... I reminded myself that the times that I have reached out to M, looking for reassurance, inevitably I’m annoyed by his response... So it’s like erratic, hot and cold [which] triggers me ... Every time it happens I get upset, my mind spirals. Every time I go to *me* for reassurance, I feel better. I say the right things. And I ask the right questions; he’s not going to.

This isn’t even about him! Rachel, this isn’t about him. This is another example of a need that we must get fulfilled by us. Because we’re the best one to do it, not because it’s right or wrong. Because we’re best aligned to provide this type of reassurance. And because when I seek to get it from somebody else, it hurts. And I’m not going to do that to you anymore. I’m not going to hurt you anymore. I’m not going to leave you anymore. I’m not going to put you in the hands of somebody that will unintentionally hurt you, that you will then interpret as an intentional slight or sign that they’re not trustworthy. I’m not going to live like that.

I’m not going to have it so that our value, our self-esteem is based on whether somebody—who is in their own world, having his own life, who I’ve known for three months who you been sleeping with for two months as of today, an anniversary which he reminds you of—is consistent and reliable with you. You see how ridiculous that is? You see how that’s a set up for everybody involved?

I must be consistent and reliable. I must be dependable and put you first. I must prioritize you, always. If I'm going to be preoccupied with anybody, it's going to be you.

And I am not going to ask somebody else to provide that for you.

I continue to reinforce the importance of self-attachment and assert I can be trusted and should be turned to for reliable comfort. I started to self-soothe here, then I attempted to sabotage, but the woods intervened. Engaging with the woods I feel calm again, centered. My anxiety leaves and I feel empowered...

December 10, 2020 cont., This part probably goes in the dating section, but I'm keeping it all here. So last night it was clear I had a bad headache. And I thought, "you know Rachel, if you have a bad headache tomorrow, maybe it's better that you stay home by yourself. Maybe it's better that he doesn't come over." And of course my mind organizes that into an opportunity to test this man, to see if he cares ... if he'll fight to see me or if he's like "whew! I really didn't want to see this woman anyway!" Which is how I will probably interpret any response that he might have other than one that says "I'm coming over anyway." I don't know if that's really what it was about, I just didn't want to entertain him if I felt like shit! But of course I have to make it into an opportunity to test him. To create some insecurity in him. Or, worse, create more insecurity in me by setting things up to prove to myself that this person is playing me.

I mean this is attachment shit, this is not logical or reasonable or even reflective of how I feel when I'm with him. But when I'm not with him, this is the shit that comes up. It's not OK! It's abusive in fact, Rachel, to be talking to yourself like this. It's creating an all or nothing situation.

How am I supposed to tell if my feelings are right? That's how this insecurity

works right? So maybe I need to look at where the wind is coming from. And maybe I need to do what the trees do in [the] wind, we should just bend when it comes and sway and dance and then rest when it's not here.

We're at the top of the pond, everything is moving so fast the wind is starting to blow pretty hard, the sky is extraordinary, you can see the snow running across the top of the pond when the wind comes. Gorgeous and frigid. This is just the beginning. It's going to get so much colder. The rock is slippery. Madgie's ears are blowing back in the wind.

Here's an example of the tenacity of my thinking, of my insecurity. We are walking back and I keep thinking "well really, what's the harm in asking him to just send a text before he goes to bed?" Seriously?!

The harm is that we're then relying on him to reassure us. The harm is that we don't get to feel the discomfort of making up all this bullshit about how he doesn't care. How he is using us. The harm is dependency on another person to help us feel OK and worthy. The harm is to continue to abuse yourself by saying those mean things to yourself. The harm is preoccupation with a fantasy, not with you or reality. The harm is the assumptions and calming that cover your experience of insecurity that requires healing.

I proved I was trustworthy by not letting myself take the "easy" way out (i.e., seeking reassurance from him), which as we know tends to be the hard way (i.e., if we do ask, he will fail at it, and I will use that as a way to discredit him, or feel hurt, or both).

The next few days I have apart from M are difficult. I try to sabotage the relationship in several ways:

December 13, 2020- D, Madge and I are at Panthera at about 8 AM on Sunday. Last night

I drank some red wine even though I said I wasn't going to drink and I had a really nice night other than going on OK Cupid and responding to somebody that sent me an intro. I did respond that I wasn't looking for any more partners but that I like friends. But I still feel bad about it. I feel like I've done something wrong ... because if M did it I'd be really upset. It felt like a betrayal of sorts ... but I went on it anyway because I was feeling really insecure ... I felt like I was sabotaging things. Like I had already let my mind spiral into all this bad shit and now I was like "I better have a back up plan." That's so weird, it's so not how I actually feel. Now I'm thinking about whether I am going to tell him or not. For what purpose. [I keep stopping because it's so gorgeous out here this morning, so foggy. And the sun is coming in and lighting the trees up....] So last night I had a pretty good idea why I was doing it. And looking back I really feel like it was some kind of sabotage...

[I started to rehearse what I wanted to say to M to explain my behavior:] "Before I made this move I had been thinking that the domesticity was too much. Having you over while you're working and me adapting my life around that, feels too familiar and uncomfortable for me. I'd like it to be special when we get together. And I don't think there's any need for us to, I don't know? Move into the domestic realm? I think I got spooked by my feelings. And also by my behavior. And what seems to me like a lack of clarity around purpose. It seems like I can obviously assume that you wanted to spend more time with me, but it also seems like it was a convenience thing or something that you thought you should do. I don't know. Was it a test? What was it? It's not that it matters that much in theory, it's that my feelings are all jumbled up about this and I want to make sense about it. And I want to be clear about what I want. I want exciting, fun,

spontaneous, anticipation, sexy, cuddly, great sleeps, dancing, improv, creativity, fun. I love the making food for each other part, and the pizza in the middle of the night naked in your kitchen. I'm not ready for the rest. And I wasn't clear on that. And last night it became clear. And I think instead of just noticing that and feeling safe enough to say that, some old bullshit came out to sabotage. To push you away, to not feel anything about you, to move on? That's too much. But part of me felt like that. And I don't want to. I really dig you. I just ... don't want to get too serious. Even though I'm very serious about you. I don't want to get too serious."

Reading this now, it feels like new information. I do not remember ever feeling this clear about not wanting things to be serious. That makes me curious, but mostly I am feeling grateful. I can see how the woods help me to expose suppressed ideas and emotions, just like it is doing here:

December 13, 2020- D cont., ... Part of me thinks that all the things I worry about or put on him are things that I might feel on some level. And that I'm not owning them. Like I'm projecting them onto him ... whatever the fear is that I'm thinking about him, I need to think of that actually in relation to me.

The woods help calm me enough to discover that the things I worry he might be feeling (bored, only wanting "good times," wanting to keep things casual), it seems *I* am actually feeling, but I do not feel able to advocate for myself or directly set boundaries ...

December 13, 2020 cont., So anyway, last night ... he FaceTimed me and ...I saw his face and I just was beaming. It was really nice to see him, it wasn't relief I felt, it was just joy at seeing him, he just makes me smile. So now, I'm not going to run away. And I'm not going to sabotage. And I'm not going to manipulate. And yes, I will tell him about the

OkCupid thing, because if he was doing it I would be curious what made him do it...

Like, what compelled me to do it. And what's that about, and what to do with it?

I think it's clear why I did it, I was not owning my own feelings, and I was, well part of me was, trying to sabotage things. Or maybe just push them a little bit. Just running instead of owning how I was feeling. And so now I'm owning how I'm feeling. And it's interesting... it's one of those situations where I'm like "save me from what I want" and maybe that's part of it for me, I don't trust what I want? Because it's so new for me? But it's an experiment ... And so I think this is what's going on, I'm not sure, let's try it out, OK?

Also, I think it's clear that I'm struggling with not being in touch with or being able to communicate my wants, and that makes perfect sense, because it's all new for me. So I'm projecting them onto him. I just need to feel all my feelings. And also understand that sometimes it takes me time to process through them. And that's OK.

Even though I was scared to share my "mistake" I pressured myself to share because I tried to convince myself this would be living in integrity. It did not occur to me at the time to wonder if it was innocent, or if it was an attempt to sabotage, create insecurity in him, because I was starting to accept that he cared for me.

When I was alone and rehearsing, I tried to convince myself that I felt confident, but things didn't go as planned. My migraines were worsening, and I was starting to have panic attacks.

December 15, 2020- D: it's nearly 1 and Magick and I are at Panthera, finally, after missing two days in a row. I've had an extremely bad migraine for many days now and there were some happenings that I think were influenced by the migraine or vice versa.

It's been a very stressful couple of days. From an attachment perspective, I think I'm noticing the ways that logic can't necessarily help.

I do wonder if the migraine is part of this dysfunctional socialized process. When I have a migraine, or I am otherwise sick, I still struggle to directly ask for what I need. Somehow that is easier, because when I am clearly in agony it is obvious that I need something. Somehow it is acceptable to need or want care or attention when one is sick.

December 15, 2020- D cont., On Saturday night I felt nothing... I talked to M that evening and it went really badly. I shouldn't say that. But it definitely triggered him. And it was very emotional. And I was really scared that I had fucked everything up...

I started thinking that this is another example of me trying to make him insecure, since I'm so insecure. Like some sort of power-play? I know that's not all of it, and that might not be it at all, but I fear that it is. And it's another example of how I've just attempted to balance things in an unhealthy way and it's backfired terribly. I was distraught when I thought that I had truly sabotaged this relationship. And I also felt terrible for hurting him. I also ... understand that I didn't betray him or do anything that terrible, and so that was an interesting balance to make in my mind while staying present with him.

During that conversation I said to him that I'm scared, that I didn't want to be in love with him. He never responded to any of that. At one point he said 'I'm hearing you about being scared. I'm sorry that you're scared.' And that didn't help my anxiety but I was able to manage it.

I started to consider that I was trying to make my partner insecure because I was feeling so deeply insecure—another indirect attempt to address issues that I am either unaware of or too

scared to confront. I pushed myself to maintain a high level of differentiation and overcome my fear, but I started to crack:

December 15, 2020- D cont., Sunday night in the middle of the night I woke up and he was on the other side of the bed. And I had all these spiraling thoughts. I got so upset. Every idea I had to address what was going on was, or felt like it was, the wrong move. I felt trapped. I went downstairs and sobbed on the couch. He called down “are you OK?” I responded ‘yes’ obviously I was not. When I came back upstairs he was really gentle and kind with me. I realized on the couch when I was sobbing that the emotions were just overload, and as I was sitting in my body I realized that I was in excruciating pain. The migraine was just completely out of hand. And all of the emotions that I was feeling earlier in the night and in the day, all the turmoil just sort of went away when I realized that it really wasn’t like a psychological event, it seemed neurological. Now of course these are arbitrary differences. Part of it is probably just trying to calm thru logical self-soothing, M’s logical self, my logical self. It worked! At least for me.

So M offered to have sex with me which was amazing. And we did. And it was great. And then he did some daddy stuff with me around orgasms. And that really helped my anxiety a lot. He’s really attuned, maybe just doesn’t have the language? Also I was just feeling loving ... the actions that we both make are love actions, they’re not caretaking, they’re like what I think of as love, reinforcing supporting enjoying celebrating holding gazing exploring. So this helps me with my struggle around feeling like I love him, and also the push and pull of that, like I want to keep doing all those things, but then those are love things. And he does so many thoughtful things for me that feel like love things, and so I guess it’s a little confusing. ...

soooo I nearly sabotaged this fucking wonderful relationship and I hurt this man who I really care about. And he seems to be over it. It's interesting watching him build evidence to support his triggered assumptions. That's what I do, and I told him that. I told him I am in a constant state of fear, and maybe I wasn't clear that I'm not that way when I'm with him. But when we're apart, I am. And I felt so exposed and vulnerable after telling him that stuff. I really exposed how I felt. And he was pretty silent about it, but I managed it, it was OK. I trusted that things will be OK. I think that's an amazing sign related to my self-attachment.

And also past trauma; man, it's hard to overcome, it's like automatic. There's got to be a way. I'm going to keep doing the woods. But... I just wasn't talking or even thinking about what I needed, and maybe ... it also could be that I don't know what my needs are and so I seek to control instead of communicate, tolerate, and deal with the repercussions....

... So summary thought. I'm not really interested in making M feel insecure. I've always done that in relationships. I have no interest in taking any of his power away on any level. In fact it's dangerous and bad for me to do that with this person and in general. And it doesn't feel good.

So it's not my job to ensure his ego is intact or that he has confidence but it's definitely not my role to undermine his confidence. And what I need to do in fact, is help build my confidence, not have him do it, but me do it.

I've got to work on building my confidence. Right now I'm falling back into the old pattern of doing nice things for him so that he will complement me which then helps build my confidence. This is a hypothesis. Anyway instead of just doing nice things for

him and hoping to get a “good girl” which he does and it’s sexy, I need to be building my confidence. What can we do to build your confidence, Rachel? Let’s work on that today. And each time I focus on him or am preoccupied with him, I want to ask myself ‘what can we do to build your confidence’ that’s the second test that we have. The first is to ask ‘what is it that you really want in this moment?’

Although I have to process through it, I do eventually pull the attention on M back to me. I noticed upon reading this again that I shared two vulnerable, important things during this “argument” that M does not respond to because he is too upset. Did I again get him upset so I could directly share how I was feeling (at the worst possible time) and undermine myself and him again in the process? It sure seems like it. I mean, what would have happened if I had noticed and then told him before sabotaging things that I was scared I was falling in love with him, that I was scared all the time? I imagine he would have comforted me; instead I created all of this drama and eventually got comforted, but only after hurting him and then experiencing a migraine and a panic attack.

At the same time, I believe my confidence is growing. One, I was consistently working to stop myself from attempting to feel I had power through making M depend on me. Two, I reinforce that I need to prioritize, identify, and give myself what I need instead of doing the socialized “take care of him.” The patterns where I subliminate my needs and hope I will receive care in return, then become resentful or feel invisible and victimized when I do not (thus creating what I fear most), though I miss that I tried to do just that through my act of sabotage. The big takeaway here is another experiment: when I focus on or am preoccupied with him, I suggest I try asking myself “what can we do to build your confidence so you feel better” and “what is it that you really want in this moment?”

I do understand that part of me is still trying to create insecurity in him. I think this is because I feel so powerless. Additionally, I wonder if I am trying to create insecurity because I have never directly identified or prioritized my wants and needs, nor has anyone, including me, really asked or showed genuine interest in wanting to know. Instead, I prioritize helping my partner(s) identify their needs so I can work to provide them, to create a dependency. In that dynamic, if I focus on myself after the fact, it is indirect and thus a set up. Instead of directly advocating, I analyze their reaction to my care, find “the problem” (e.g., they are too self-focused, dependent, or emotionally stunted; they are always playing the victim, etc.), and due to this problem, I argue, they do not care about or give me what I need, placing me in the victim role. To feel like less of a victim, I focus on what I do not like about my partner and how they are failing me and try to change them, but I am still powerless as my complaints do more harm than good and do not get me closer to having my needs recognized. This whole unconscious dynamic is the definition of sabotage and passive aggressive behavior, and it helps no one.

It makes sense to instead just directly advocate for myself, but minute by minute, when things are going well and I feel close to my partner, even when I try to attune to myself, I have no idea what I want or need. My mind just goes blank. This makes me anxious, or I feel stupid because I cannot think of anything and get nervous. I then think things like: “now we are sitting in silence and how much attention can I ask for anyway?” Then I redirect my focus on my partner... and reenter the passive aggressive sabotage loop ...

December 16, 2020- D, ...we're Panthera at 7:25. It's 15° out apparently, we're getting a winter storm tonight which I'm excited about. M is coming at some point today. Last night I was alone and I did a bunch of work on looking at my confidence and what I

needed in the moment. I'm definitely realizing that I'm trying to get my confidence and reassurance through another person...

It seems I might be quieting the things that I am confident about around M, because of a lack of interest [from him], or who knows. So where [M has strengths] historically are places that I would've been easily able to engage with in the past. But right now I'm really more interested in the body and intuition than logic and reason... I'm sure M would say that that's a positive thing. I'm not so sure how I feel about it at least from a confidence perspective but it doesn't really matter that much, because this is who I am right now, what I'm interested in and I'm not going to change that. [I process through this more] ... Anyway the most important part here is that my confidence cannot be tied to him and his engagement. In fact, I need to see whether or not [what he provides is enough]. Perhaps it is. ... it's just that this fear needs to go away. And maybe that's not through proving myself. Maybe that's just through self-attachment. In the woods. Oh wow I just took a picture of the light on the trees. It's so gorgeous. This is what I'm about. The rest is just not that important to me.

Here I am trying to assert and accept my new identity, such as it is, and I find "the problem" (i.e., my new identity does not seem to be resonating with M and his interests; even if he says it does). This concerns me, but I try to downplay it and then suggest perhaps he is not enough for me.

Two days later, I have another bonding and positive time with M, and I allow myself to really look at what (I imagine) led to my recent sabotaging behavior:

December 18, 2020- D, we're trudging down Panthera, through like almost 2 feet of snow and it's beautiful but really hard. M just left this morning after being here for the storm, M shoveled out my whole driveway and just in general took really good care of

me, concern and care. And I did the same for him. It's really nice. Highs and lows. One thing I was thinking about was, not sure if I talked about earlier, that incident [OkCupid guy] where I was trying to sabotage things. And what I talked to M about was this idea that, like, the anxiety was too much. The attachment anxiety was too much, I needed to relieve the tension, I couldn't reach out to him obviously because he was with [a friend of his who I worked to not be suspicious of], and I just couldn't hold myself in that moment.

Also [I sabotaged] because I was basically disassociating I suppose in a way. That's what A asked about and I thought "oh yeah that is kind of what it was like, I just completely separated from myself and was in robot mode." And it was just major attachment anxiety, so reaching out to that other person was like a way to take the strain off or something. And next time I'm going to remember my body. And do something with my body like dance or go on the treadmill or hopefully not trudge through 20 feet of snow, though it felt really good to do it. It's feeling good as I'm doing it right now... Anyway... I'm not going to see M for four days. Maybe it'll be less. We'll see if we can make it. I'm kind of looking forward to it. I'm not dreading it. I felt sad this morning but it'll be good. Interesting at least.

I acknowledge my prior level of anxiety and after the fact share it directly with M. I did not consider sharing it before I tried to sabotage, but any sharing seems like a positive step. I also put a plan in place for next time I start to panic or disassociate from attachment anxiety. This plan does not include reaching out to M. Basically, I am experimenting with personal responsibility, owning my own feelings and experience, and not asking him to change who he is in order for me to feel comfortable.

After a few days apart, I am still worried about my anxiety, so I shift my attention to

figuring out if I should continue to explore ENM relationships, given the woman I had been seeing had suggested we just be friends.

December 21, 2020- D I do want to figure out what to do with all this anxiety. I know it's like triangulation to try to find another person, but I've tried doing it with myself and it doesn't really work that well. I suppose I should just keep trying [to navigate the anxiety on my own]. It doesn't feel worth it to shake things up with M and honestly I have no idea if my justifications for this are actual or if there's some other unconscious thing going on, but it seems pretty clear to me ... that having a person that engages with me more regularly would be nice. I could do that with [a person I had dated previously] maybe I will.

I'm near positive that [I believe M is flirting with other people] Now, I don't know if it's worth it to bring it up, but looking at it reciprocally it feels completely worth it because I'm dealing with his emotional intensity around insecurity, and so why not ask him to him deal with mine. What's unclear is if he can do that without changing [the way he engages with me] which is part of the problem, right? I don't want to close things, I want to open things...

I had been working on building my confidence, advocating for myself, and not giving more than I am getting, and by that, I mean not providing him with things that he cannot or will not provide unless I do so without expectations. At the same time, M was still hurt about my responding to someone on OKC, and he was getting rigid about me not seeing other people. I did not appreciate this, but I also had been committed to not asking M to change his behavior even when it was upsetting to me. That was a challenge for him because he also aims to please, and he has his own related insecurities.

December 21, 2020- D cont., I also told him last night that being with me, it's not a calming experience. I'm changeable and I'm exploratory. So if he's looking for total security, and by that, I mean through my behavior, that I behave exactly how he wants me to behave, that's not going to happen. ...And he said that he understood, and that he was down for that, he just didn't want to feel like he was intentionally being baited. And he had a good point there because I unintentionally intentionally baited him twice already, and I told him it was unconscious, wasn't intentional and that it might happen again. But I can guarantee that as soon as I recognize [I am enacting a defensive or sabotaging behavior] that I'm going to say something about it, and we can talk about it, and I'm not a fucking cheater. And I appreciate him and I don't want to be with anybody else.

There's definitely an element of control here though. And my concern is that, if I say I'm not going to deal with this control shit, that I'm going to talk to whoever I want to talk to, that he'll say "well then I'll talk to whoever I want to talk to" and that will mean that I'll have to work on trusting him. But guess what? I'm already doing that! Because I already think he is talking to other people. I'm not monitoring what he's doing in any way, but he shouldn't be monitoring what I'm doing either. ...

In general I feel like I'm following the rules ... the rules are not "don't do anything that might cause a feeling of insecurity." The rules are, have open communication about it. And I need to confirm that with him, because ... the agreement to me is that we should be able to bring up if we feel insecure, that's the ethical non-monogamy way isn't it? Be able to talk about things that we feel insecure about and then work through them? I haven't been doing that. So I'm going to do that also. And he only does it when I push him. So I don't know.

I can also say that it's more likely that I won't reach out to other people if I can process my insecurity with him, and I haven't been doing that, and that's an option. And that would really be dependent on him understanding and being empathetic like I am with him around fear and insecurity. That I might need direct reassurance.

With the time apart I get more perspective, but I also start to confront my denial and lack of direct communication. I remain convinced that bringing in another person for me to engage with more regularly will help my anxiety. I am just not sure it is worth it.

At the time, I convinced myself I can navigate my experience as long as we are clear with each other on the rules regarding ENM. I suggest I am trying to navigate those rules, trying to own my own behavior, and also wanting him to hold himself accountable for taking care of his own issues instead of asking me to bend to his insecurity. I finally admit to some of my projection that I am not doing what I say he is not doing, but on reflection, I believe there is more projection happening. Perhaps bringing up ENM is me, again, unconsciously triggering his insecurity to sabotage or create an opportunity for me to bring up my issues, which I continue to suppress.

This losing myself by focusing on him continues and I start to notice where it is really undermining me and my ability to be honest about my feelings, experience things, and advocate for myself.

December 26, 2020—D, ... When I was trying to navigate how he felt for me, which of course we know is me trying to navigate how I feel about him. I tried to bring up how it's challenging thinking about spending so much time together this coming week, because it confuses me. Because when we're together, so close, it's so good, when we're apart it's like there's nothing there.

Important to note that during this time, when we are apart, M and I have very little contact, sometimes not connecting for a day, and that is new and difficult for me to manage.

December 26, 2020—D cont. And I feel like I'm misinterpreting his behavior. Like I'm seeing his behaviors meaning something more than what maybe they mean. And that would be fine if I was OK with allowing myself to feel the things that I feel for him [love], which is what I do when he acts in certain ways because suddenly it's safe. Like it's OK for me to feel these things because he feels these things. [Shit it's windy].

Anyway. I can feel whatever the fuck I want to feel. Regardless of how he feels. So I don't know why I am so scared. It's game playing. I fear that I'm going to be so into him, it's going to turn him off.

... but wait Rachel, the challenge is not that you're so into him, the challenge is that you're not really sure if you are so into him. And you don't trust your motivations.

Because when you break them down, it's totally convoluted. Like, is this about security? I do not believe I can trust my feelings, and that makes sense. While I suggest I am worried about having more feelings for him than he has for me, I then question if the issue is actually the opposite; that maybe I do not have feelings for him, but I am just looking for security! I then change again and suggest this issue is not about my feelings being misleading, it is about my mind, about not trusting my interpretation of my feelings ...

December 26, 2020—D cont....Anyway, I can go through all the different ways that I might try to manipulate things but the end result is that if I'm in my body and I'm in the moment that's all that matters. I don't have to express things or not express things, I don't have to hold back or push forward. I don't have to do anything other than be in my body and feel, experience, and that's where the goodness is. I don't have to worry. Worrying

does nothing for me. And also what we're finding, is that analysis and maneuvering actually hurts and backfires! So all these fears they're actually not helping you! They're actively hurting you.

The only thing that makes things good, feel good etc. is in the Being. The fear always has negative consequences. Because either I'm taking action related to that fear, and it's backfiring or hurting me or you're hurting somebody else. Or I'm not taking action. I'm living in fear which is painful to me. And hurts me internally. And then suppresses how I act, or changes how I act, which then turns into some maneuver that ends up backfiring and hurting me or somebody else. My body, my intuition, my feelings, those are the only safe places.

My analysis is me worrying when it comes to relationships, it's not good. There's too much baggage and programming none of it serves me! [When] I am in my body I second-guess that and think, 'oh, you're just doing a maneuver,' like trying to manipulate him through sex or trying to play hard to get or 'maybe if you stay silent he'll come towards you, maybe you should make him insecure etc. etc.' that's all gameplaying, so even when I'm not gameplaying my mind is telling me I'm game playing which is fucking bullshit. Maybe it's not bullshit but still it's like *how do you make the unconscious conscious without being overly self-conscious?*

I am feeling very suspicious of my "mind;" I am convinced I cannot trust it at all. Reading this I wonder what would have happened if I considered this through an Internal Family Systems (IFS) parts lens (see Schwartz, 1994). Which part of my mind can I not trust, the part triggered by attachment anxiety? That seems clear, but at this point I think any interpretation or analysis is suspect. I imagine this just adds to my anxiety. Instead, I decided that what I should be focused

on is pleasure...

December 26, 2020—D cont., I mean it's all about motivation right? if my motivation is to feel pleasure, that's kind of the purest motivation there is, isn't it!?

Feeling pleasure it turns out, may actually be what we all need... Pain hurts me, hurts you, and makes it so I can't feel pleasure—what is this fucking Christian bullshit, deny yourself pleasure for what? It doesn't help anybody. It only helps the system and capitalism. Fuck that. And I should be clear about what kind of pleasure I'm talking about here, in this case it's physical pleasure, But it's also joy. It's also fun and silly and creative, connective, relational. Pleasure is the answer.

I'm thinking about that values exercise where hedonism was looked down upon, and it's like the world is upside down and inside out. Here's an example: I have a dry heel, probably because of foot fungus, which makes me feel sick to my stomach to even say out loud. I'm so filled with shame and humiliation about it. What the fuck. Anyway so I'm in the middle of the best sex ever and I worry that M is going to feel my dry heel and he's going to be grossed out, it's going to turn them off. And so I worry about that and I'm focusing on that—'how do I move my foot so that it doesn't touch him or how do I blah blah blah' I know he's going to judge me. But you know what, fuck that. That's his hangup that does not have to be my hangup. And my pleasure shouldn't be stopped because I'm afraid that it's going to gross him out and then what? He'll stop fucking me? He'll judge me? He's already made a comment about it. It didn't kill me. it is an issue, it doesn't have to be my issue.

Plus all these things I'm worrying about him doing [rejecting me, being disgusted by me], he may or may not do them. *But I am doing them! It's already happening!* So I'm

scared that's going to happen but it's already happening? Fuck that! That is so stupid. I don't see how this is helping me or serving me when it comes to sex. I really don't.

It is something that I want to explore a little bit more, because...you know, I made a commitment to experiencing my emotions. I just don't know if, well maybe, the purpose of it is to actually face shame and address things that shame, and see if I survive them. Because I'm already surviving my internalized shame. And it's just mean. Why does somebody else's judgment matter so much to me? This needs to stop.

NJ asked me what my heart wanted to feel safe ... what popped into my head was, 'I just want to be who I am fully. Without worry. Without feeling like something that I'm going to do is going to offend or be judged or shamed.' I know for a fact that the more myself I am, the better off I am. I need to let loose more.

After seeking to convince myself that pleasure is the answer, I bring up the ways my socialization gets in the way of me feeling pleasure. I admit that my self-objectification is abusive, going against my values and commitment to expansion, and is making my fear of being ridiculed and rejected a reality. My internalized shame, ostensibly put into place to help me avoid being shamed, is actively shaming me—creating the experience I continue to fear may happen. I am being disgusted by and rejecting myself as a means of avoiding potentially receiving that from someone else, and I find this unacceptable. In the end I reinforce that as counterintuitive as it seems, wholeness is what will keep me safe.

December 29, 2020 —D, ...And one thing I did say to him yesterday that feels so critical is this idea that I would rather he be confident and love himself than be insecure and stay with me out of insecurity. That I feel worthy enough and able to be confident enough and love myself enough that I don't have to try to make him insecure and I don't have to be

insecure either. That we can be the best people that we can be and boost each other up and do that with joy and abandon. And then if he leaves or if I leave so be it, but I don't want to stay together out of insecurity. And I really want him to be confident and love himself and I really want to be confident and love myself.

That seems like really obvious shit. But I rarely see this in couples therapy. And I guess I just wonder what it would be like for people to consider that question '*do you want your partner to be confident? If so, what are you doing to support that and if not, is undermining your partner's security serving you?*' I can't say that I've ever really wanted my partners to be confident for very long. I just realized that doesn't serve me now.

One minute I am acknowledging how I am undermining my confidence, the next minute I am exploring how I am seeking to not undermine my partner's. I am feeling a lot of anxiety, but I am logically sure that I do not want him to be less confident. In fact, I am recognizing that when I seek to make him anxious, I am undermining myself. This realization is another strike against ENM, which I know creates anxiety for him, even as it presumably alleviates my anxiety. I am not aware that by doing this, I am putting my needs second, and if I even come close to recognizing it, I have a justification (i.e., if he is insecure, that will affect me). Basically, I am still adapting my behavior to try to ensure my partner is ok so he will not hurt me.

Could it be I'm Falling in Love?

January is a challenging month. I continue to try to define and accept myself in a way that provides at least a framework for me to work with while also trying to navigate this new relationship.

January 2, 2021, Anyway, I'm just finishing my walk at the secret place. And thinking about how I've been feeling boring, especially with M and worried that I'm not charming

enough or interesting enough and thinking about who I am right now: somebody that walks in the woods and that works on being in that, works on Being and on my emotional health and my attachments ... That's who I am and it's enough. I'm not going to tell you something interesting that I read. I'm not going to share with you new music unless it's mine probably. I'm an artist, I'm a walker in the woods and I'm a swimmer in the river. I'm silly and serious. I'm a dancer, a painter, a poet, and a musician. I'm Wolf, I'm Deer, I'm Owl, Crow. I'm Bear, Mouse, I'm Eagle and I'm enough.

I feel I am very clear here about who I am, even though I worry that is not enough for M (who, in real life, clearly does not have a problem with my personality or lack thereof). I also affirm that it is enough for *me*, and that is what matters. You may recall I had a similar conversation with myself one month prior. I go through this worry about whether I am boring many times, and each time it comes back to me asking myself, "Is M boring?" When he is creative, or I am with his son, who is very creative, my heart swells, which of course ultimately results in more anxiety.

January 2, 2021- D, Just back from M's house. Last night he made dinner for me and his son and his son's girlfriend. It was amazing. And then we did some music afterwards and we all did a little set. And I think I've just come to accept that I love him. And I really don't want to. I don't even know what it actually means. But my heart is just happy around him and I adore him and I love being with him and I have really deep feelings for him. And it's scaring the shit out of me.

So last night I went to bed just wondering if he was ever going to love me. And just [internally] freaking out about it. I woke up at 2 AM with that thought and then I went back to sleep after taking a pill and had the worst dream. [that M was a liar, sleeping around, trying to blame me for that, mocking me for believing he cared about me] ... And

I woke up crying and scared and just freaked the fuck out. Totally believing that it was true.

And we talked about it a little bit in the night, and I asked him if he ever thought he was going to love me. And he said “yes, I do Rachel, I do” and I mean does that mean he loves me? Does that mean he thinks he someday will love me? Why does it even matter? ... My heart is hurting around this. Like I cannot tolerate feeling more for him than he feels for me. And I feel... like I can't tell if it's that I don't know what I want and so I'm focusing on what he wants or what the fuck is going on. But I'm kind of heartsick over it. He was wonderful of course. He held me after I was crying and he said “I'm here I'm here.” At breakfast I cried, he wanted to know how he could help ... And also I'm not going to see him for three nights. And that seems too long. And I cried hearing that. And I feel like crying now hearing that.

More of the same struggling with if I have more feelings for him than he does for me, but I finally admit to myself that I believe I love him, even though I do not know exactly what that means. In fact, I worry that it is just oxytocin, the bonding hormone:

January 2, 2021- D cont., It's like the sex, every time we have sex it's bonding for me. I don't think it is for him. I think it's recreational. And I know that he says it brings us closer together and he holds me really close afterwards and then he just shifts his mind and goes elsewhere, but I'm still in that place, that bonded place. After sex I feel love. I feel deep love. And I guess I don't really want to separate that but then it feels dangerous. Everything feels so dangerous.

I don't want to stop having sex [just] because it brings me to a place of love all the time, but it's like, that's part of it right? Because the sex requires trust, and when I'm

feeling nervous it fucks with my trust. But, I have to be able to feel love and trust in order to keep engaging at this level. Maybe I don't have to but it feels like without it, I'm scared. I'm too scared. And there's so much sex. And I need to be careful that I'm not just letting myself be used. I mean I'm enjoying it too, obviously. But there's just something about it, like that he's fucking me and it doesn't matter to him while I'm feeling love, and that just feels wrong. Like I don't know how to reconcile that. That feels really, really dangerous to me.

And I guess it's not dangerous is it? What's the danger? I fall in love with him and he doesn't fall in love with me and then he leaves me? We'll be fine. We'll be fine either way. Just enjoy the sex. Enjoy the closeness, enjoy the joy and just be sure that you're advocating for what you want to need. And I did that last night! I said that I wanted him to [focus on my body in a certain way]. And I asked for it. And I got it.

Feeling love and bonding is so terrifying. I consider if I should stop having sex with him so I can feel safe, but I then convince myself that there is no danger if I love him and he does not love me; no danger if he is just using me for sex or leaves me. As long as I get to experience these feelings it is worth it. Part of me is very confident I will be fine if, and when things end, I have had bigger heartbreaks; but my wounded self feels differently and keeps warning me of danger.

January 2, 2021- D cont., ...That dream was heartbreaking. It wasn't just that I was made a fool of. It was like that he wasn't real and ...that hurt... because I really want him to be real. And I have to remember it's only been 3 1/2 months. And I have to remember that love is just a concept. And that hearing the words doesn't mean shit.

What I was just thinking now is "how am I going to get him to love me." Fuck that. It's more, "how can I be lovable with myself to myself and if he chooses to engage

with me then so be it” but I’m not going to try to be more lovable for him, you know and work harder for his love, you know fuck that. That’s the childhood shit isn’t it. Like maybe if I just, you know, listen more, be prettier or more interesting or blah blah blah be more talented, more accomplished you’ll pay attention to or love me. No. Not for him.

I’m not begging somebody to love me. How could you not love me? I’m totally lovable! So I just have to figure out that sick feeling in my throat. And why I just want to tell him how I feel [in love with him]. I’m not going to, even though I sort of did, but I don’t think he heard me. I just need to be brave and be in the moment and stop worrying about words that are meaningless and stop worrying that I feel too much and just be as I am. And enjoy what we have. We both talk a lot about how grateful we both are to have each other during this time and just in general.

I did comfort myself a lot when I was crying in the middle of the night and I didn’t totally pull away when he reached for me and I didn’t manipulate or try to get him to be worried about me. I was very centered around it and I need to do some tapping. I celebrate turning to myself when I am very upset, because that is a new practice for me. But my wounded self is convinced that the sex is creating too much love or bonding for me and not for him and that feels dangerous. I don’t want to be made a fool of, but I also don’t want to suppress the love feelings that are so enjoyable when I am not anxious. My confident, analytical self is recognizing that I am playing out old wounds and believes that I am lovable and that I don’t need to humiliate myself by begging someone else to love me.

These conflicting parts have been at war for months: When he says something kind or implying love, I am euphoric, but then when he seems indifferent, I get angry and want to end things. I am convinced he is playing me, even though all of his behavior says otherwise. Then I

get scared that I am using him. It is all a giant mess of conflicting emotional reactions. I struggle to tolerate my feelings. I struggle to see and accept my value even when I am not producing or when M does not notice or respond to me.

I had also been trying, and mostly failing, to navigate the rapid change from joy with M, to alone, then back to joy again and again, three times a week. I use Emotional Freedom Technique (i.e., tapping; Clond, 2016) to calm my intense anxiety and pain upon separating from M, and it works until it ceases working. I sob every time we part. About a month into it, I realize this is reminiscent of my childhood:

February 1, 2021, Magick and I are just back from our hike or Panthera. NJ and Olive were with us. It was about 10° out and the snow has started. I realized at the end of my walk, through talking with NJ, it's possible that the sobbing after I leave M is an old reflection of leaving my father. It feels so similar now that I think about it, the joy and escapism of being with him and then having to return to my mother's home, which was a living hell. So now I can remind myself that I'm not going back to my mother's home. I'm going back to my home. Which I love. And which is safe and nourishing. And I am safe and nurturing. So I don't need to sob each time he leaves. But if little Rachel needs to do that for a bit and needs to be soothed then I'll do that too. I'm not gonna judge it one way or another, I'm gonna accept that's how it feels and see what happens.

As a child, I was helpless and reliant upon my father to see me and protect me, but my attempts to get him to save me never worked. I took what I could get, and it was agony. It is similar with M. When I am with him, I am filled with elation, I feel loved and grounded, and then I return to stark isolation. He is so good at compartmentalizing I fear when I am out of his sight I just cease to exist, which is another childhood wound. Once I am able to calm myself, I have clarity. I see

that M is a good person, but I need to be honest with myself about him.

January 4, 2021- D ... I think I can trust him. But the trust is based on who he is, not based on who I want him to be and that's a big difference. I can't trust him to live up to what it is that I want him to be, but I can trust him to be who he is and who he believes he is for the most part. Just as much as I can trust myself to be who I am for the most part, you know? There's a distinction there...It's definitely good to have two days off at least... I try to make sure that I am living in reality, that I am seeing and accepting him for who he is, not a fantasy of who I want him to be, so I can make informed and conscious decisions. In the coming days I will test my resolve directly. I decided to share with him some of the more complicated feelings I was having around attachment and though he listened and was attentive, he did not verbally engage with me emotionally. He did hold me and stayed present and wanted to help.

Part of me had accepted that he was not the kind of person who likes to engage deeply in emotional conversations and analyze things. I have sought men like that all my life, and frankly it kills the animal sex, the tension, and the separateness; all of which I loved about, but that also triggered me with, M. Given that, I believed I needed to work *with myself* on my need to analyze and deeply connect, not with him. I recognized things like this when we were apart; once I got past the initial agony, I could reconnect to a logical and grounded self.

When I am not in attachment anxiety I can also identify and advocate for what I want, and when I do, I am surprised by the outcomes. Parenthetically, I realize I am skipping between past and present tense, that is because these struggles continue.

My story about M, that he is an accomplished player who says all the right things to get laid but feels nothing, is proven wrong again and again. Still I worry, so I take steps to get clarity

on my needs so I can decide if I need to bring my concerns up to him.

January 18, 2021 -D It's now 9:30 PM and I spent most of the night checking my phone to see if M reached out to me. Knowing full well that he was not going to. Knowing full well that he needs space and time and that his life is very full. And that my life is not. I want his attention. I'm not going to get it. I need to figure out how to navigate that. Because I really am so happy with this relationship. And I want more attention. I don't know what to do. I mean yes, I could pay attention to myself. And that's something I told myself all night tonight. But I really want his attention. And I can't have it. I want more of him. And I can't have it.

Part of me wants a distraction, to have another relationship that will fill my attention. I guess this whole dissertation is about me being that relationship with myself. So I guess I'm letting myself down in some ways by seeking relationship with other. So I need to invest more in my relationship with myself. And see if that's enough for me. Yes, there is polyamory. But I don't want to share him. I don't want anything threatening our relationship. And I think that he would be way too threatened by that. And I would be way too threatened by it too. Even though I need and want more attention.

I think if it wasn't Covid, I'd feel differently. I think if it wasn't Covid, I'd be out with friends and I wouldn't be so exhausted and I wouldn't be isolating the way that I am. I wouldn't be alone all the time like I am. It's too much alone. I need more attention. I want more attention. I want more social. But I don't want to be social with just anybody. I want M. And that is really frustrating and upsetting to me. And I guess maybe it shouldn't be, because we just really have a great time together, and then all the time that we spend apart just fucking sucks.

I guess I just have to accept that I can't get what I want. And I must somehow try to figure out how that's OK. Part of it is to remind myself that not getting what I want is part of what's making this relationship so good. But another part of me doesn't believe that. But I need to show that part of myself that it's true. Because even when M and I spend a lot of time together, I start feeling these things too. Because I can't have his full attention. And I do have his full attention, it's just for a smaller amount of time. And I just have to figure out how to tolerate that, right? Right? Because I've had relationships where I'm in the center. And it never works. And I don't want to be the center of his life. But this isn't enough for me. Not right now with this pandemic. I don't want to put pressure on him. And if I say any of this to him it will put pressure on him. And I don't want to be an obligation. But he has all the control and it doesn't feel good. I have to find some way to feel more sense of control.

I am deeply feeling the isolation of the pandemic, and I am also feeling the pain of being with someone who does not make me the center of his life.

In my past relationships, I insisted I be the center of my partner's life, and if I felt they were focusing on other things I would become threatened, extremely upset, and find a way to get their attention again (and likely blame them for seeking my attention). It was a very unhealthy way of interacting, but I could not otherwise tolerate the anxiety that comes up when my partner is focused elsewhere. In my M experiment, I was facing that issue head on with someone who not only did not see me as the center of his life, but also could not necessarily focus on or prioritize me when we were together, aside from sexually. This was often nearly intolerable for me, but I was convinced that it was what was leading to my ability to expand and experience pleasure. Instead of trying to get his attention, I refocused my attention on myself ...

January 18, 2021 -D cont. I'm going to talk to myself in the mirror now for a while. [I sat down in front of a mirror] Everything 's going to be OK Rachel. You're loved and you're lovable. And you don't need constant reminders of that from other people. That's what you're used to, I don't know if it's good for you. We've gotta find it on our own. I'll try to get to the bottom of it. If nothing else I'll just accept that it's hard. I love you.

JT keeps saying that I should be the one pursued and not the pursuer, and this is really such a challenge here. Because I would have to pull away more to get him to pursue me. I don't want to play that fucking game. It's just not going to happen. Either I accept that he's compartmentalized and that I'll only be a portion of his life. Or I don't accept it, and then I have to move on. And I don't want to move on. I don't want to end this. But this pain is just too much sometimes.

I'm lonely. I need more love and attention. Right? Then I become a nag or this weird insecure person obsessing? I feel trapped by this. It really hurts. There's nothing I can do here except accept it. And I don't want to accept it. I'm going to talk to my animals about this. I was just about to say that I know what Owl would say, but do I? Because I was thinking Owl would say "just wait and watch," but Owl goes after what she wants. With discernment. Wolf too? What would Crow do? Wolf would go after what she wants and Crow would go after what she wants. But also: discernment. Need vs. want [Owl, Wolf, and Crow, wouldn't waste energy needed for survival to chase after a want]. I don't fucking know. I just know this hurts. And I don't like it. And I don't want to regret reaching out and having him respond in a way that makes it hurt more.

I really struggle with wanting to care for myself, but then I get confused by what is the best way to care for myself. I also struggle with not being dependent, but then I am unsure if wanting

reassurance is dependence or just part of my personality. One thing is clear, there is too much anxiety, and I was (starting to get?) desperate. I leaned into my analytical self to help me figure out what to do with my overwhelming feelings:

January 19, 2021- D, Last night was tough. I need more attention. And I do need to start with myself. So tonight I'm going to pay a lot of attention to myself and stop looking outside myself and see what can happen. [I was looking for ways] to also navigate this relationship with M, which I'm putting too much emphasis on (that's a judgment) which is not helping my feelings. It's not serving me, I don't think. ...

I don't need to make any decisions. I don't need to change anything. It's just, can I tolerate it or not? On nights like last night I thought "I can't tolerate it." I wanted to reach out but then I would look desperate or something. But it's not about looking desperate that's the problem right? It's the fear of turning him off by being needy. It's the fear of becoming an obligation for him which is the last thing I want to be. And then part of me is like "well, do you want him despite his limitations? Can the same be said for you? Are you sharing your limitations? Asking for what you want?" doesn't seem like it. I am trying to be honest with myself; am I getting from M what I am giving to him? It does not seem so, but I am also not directly sharing the extent of my struggle with him. There were times when I told him I wanted more of his time, but he had no more to give. E each time I asked, he would get upset. Then I would back off because I understood his level of stress and knew based on his limitations that sharing my struggle would not result in more time or attention, but could result in more negative consequences. I felt stuck.

January 19, 2021- D cont. ... So figuring out a balance for that feels really important, because we both want and need something from the other person, because it's essential

for our well-being, yet, they are contradictory needs. So while we have a lot of alignment in a lot of areas, this is one area where we are not aligned. ... So there's got to be some middle ground here. I mean yes there's revisiting polyamory, and maybe that's like, worst case scenario. [though] I think that's what it's made for—things like this. I guess what I mean is, I'd like to try another way to figure it out first. But I don't want either of us to sacrifice to the point of resentment. So everybody has to be fully candid and open about it all the way through. Feels scary to me, but it's also important. And it's true I don't know exactly what I need, well, I do know what I feel like I need, but I'm not sure how much I need somebody else to give it to me, how much I need to give it to me...

So I guess that's the decision point also, what can I give to myself and is that enough? Or is it just that I like a lot of affection and attention and engagement? A combination? Why is it one or the other, it's probably both! And there's nothing to be ashamed of about that, Rachel.

It only doesn't work if it doesn't work or if it results in people getting hurt. But I'm a person and it hurts me. And that's just as important. It's not my job to protect other people, it is other people's jobs to navigate their own lives and make their own decisions just like it's my job to make my own decisions and to make my wants and needs clear. And then to go from there. I'm not going to stubbornly insist, but I need to be honest about it. Right? Because this is my reality. I get really upset and feel very lonely and feel abandoned and it hurts. And regardless of the reason behind it, it's still how I feel. And now I just have to see if I can provide solace for that. If that would be enough or if I simply require more care and attention externally...

I guess what I'm saying is that over adapting isn't good for anybody and maybe

it's also important to note that this may be Covid specific. If it wasn't for Covid I might feel differently about all this, I'd have more friends, I'd be hanging out more, I'd have more distractions, but here I am in Covid pandemic and going through a divorce and I'm isolating from friends and there's a lot of change; this may not be who I am fundamentally as a person and I should be very clear about that. It also may be who I am fundamentally as a person. But in other situations I'd have the capacity to bring other support in and thus need or want less. We don't know. But it doesn't matter. Because it's the reality.

Here I am trying to convince myself that what I want and need matters as much as what he wants and needs, and it is challenging, especially because I cannot get what I feel I may need from him. I do also mention the pandemic, which definitely, maybe, could be, possibly is, part of what is going on. I am starting to see that the isolation seems to be affecting my emotional state.

If I do not want to resent M or continue to catastrophize, I feel I need to tell him. Thus, soon after this discussion with myself, I do tell him, and he reassures me he engages with me, he cares for me, and he also maintains his boundaries and asserts his needs. The relationship continues to blossom as does my anxiety when I am not with him. Still, I work to refocus my attachment on myself, not just in words, but in actions and experiments; especially around understanding my feelings of love and how they are entwined with my sexual wants and needs.

Sexual Healing

This next brief section focuses on sexual advocacy. It is late January, and I was increasingly taking risks being transparent with myself and with M.

January 20, 2021- D: I followed my own advice that I gave KS [a friend] and I just shared my needs with M. And walking today I'm thinking to myself all of that pain and

assumption and negative thinking and catastrophizing and drama. All those hours spent holding myself back from reaching out to him. Wanting to tell him that I needed something but not doing it. And then convincing myself that if I did say something, I would come across as needy, or too much, or turn him off—all the things that JT warned me about when I brought it up to her. All the assumptions women make when we consider expressing our needs or wants. It's fascinating.

He didn't respond at all like [I feared]... So it was all a waste of energy. I'm overanalyzing, period, and judging myself. I want to be clear also that the way that I [shared my wants] is important. Typically in the past I would have criticized or complained or suggested he was remiss about something, like assuming he would do something and when he didn't do it get upset. I think that leads to negative outcomes. I am learning over time that my fears and paranoia need to be tested, or they will consume me. I also recognize that there is no virtue in holding back my needs, because in the end, if I do resist, eventually I will resent him and sabotage things with criticism. However, I do need to use discernment, because I cannot dump all my neurosis on my partner. Consequently, I was working with several couples who are exploring similar themes related to expressing sexual desire.

January 20, 2021 cont.,... talking about sex and desire with clients: the week before we talked about centering things on herself, knowing her own desire, wanting to find pleasure for herself, versus helping her partner feel more secure or meet his needs ...that week, they had sex several times, because she wanted to, which was unusual. And her reaction was something like *'holy shit I've never in all my years had sex where I was the center. Where I simply focused on myself, on my experience and my desire and then advocated for that. I don't even know my own body. I don't know my own way towards*

desire or fantasy.

I then explore this from the perspective of oppressive norms...

January 20, 2021 cont.: This client's experience mirrors my own and several other people who I have worked with or talked to recently. This is what we do as women. There are all these books on desire, on fantasy and ... I mean look at Cosmo for fuck's sake. I don't even know if they have that magazine anymore but when I was growing up it was all about 'how to be sexy for your man'. Not 'how to identify your own desire and what you want'. This is another pandemic. This is a disease, this objectification of women.

It doesn't work for anybody—there's pressure on the man in heterosexual relationships to perform and figure out what a woman wants and his whole manhood is based on whether or not he succeeds. Meanwhile, the woman is not supposed to know what she wants, is not supposed to actually want anything, and we're supposed to just be on the receiving end and be sexy *for* a man. What the fuck is that? That's crazy town. The challenge is, how do we figure out what we want, how do we center things on ourselves?

I note that it is important to figure out how to connect to desire, but then I deflect and go back to the intervention I did with the male in my couple...

January 20, 2021 cont., Back to client: The husband's response, as you would expect, was centered on himself, his feelings, how he reacted [to his wife's experience] and I redirected him to consider how his wife's change affected him relationally ... not his internal experience, but rather how did he act differently based on new input and what was the outcome of that? [I had recommended] externalization [relationship focus] for the man and internalization [self-focus] for the woman.

Now I'm not saying that it should be like this all the time, the man seeking to

decentralize himself, but as one step, it seems positive. So this is not ‘OK man, now focus all your attention on your partner’. Because that’s part of the problem right now, nobody’s focused on themselves directly. Indirectly though, everybody is focused on the man. And nobody really understands this is happening, and nobody’s happy. I don’t know what the younger generation is like, but these [clients] are millennials, the ones that we thought were more evolved. And the problem is that they understand intellectually there’s a problem but [solutions are] not being applied in day-to-day life. Certainly not sexually, and certainly not in the fights that are happening.

I then process my own relationship and integrate some more focus on addressing oppressive norms...

January 20, 2021 cont.: ... As for me, I think I have been expressing my needs a little bit more sexually. But it also just so happens that I’m with somebody who’s really good at reading between the lines. I have been clear on the parameters. It’s just that he’s really good at filling in everything in between. Also, he not only likes to please but he also gets pleasure from pleasing and he’s working on owning this. Which I really appreciate.

Just own it. Own that you’re using the female body. Because even if emotionally you’re not doing that, physically you are. Physically you are entering the female body during intercourse, and you are using that entry to come, to ejaculate, so without any judgment that’s what’s happening. So then it’s a negotiation, right? You can use me, my body to reach orgasm and (parenthetically I wonder if this is why women want their partners to come inside of them, so they can feel they did their job) and then I’m going to make sure that whatever you’re doing is pleasurable for me and if it’s not, we’re going to figure out if and how it can be. I’m not going to sacrifice myself or my body so that you

can get what you want. And I'm not going to [allow you to use my body] without being turned on!

So the center thing here is desire. And you may recall that that was going to be my initial dissertation. Because desire is so important. And it's something that's missing so often in heterosexual sexual relationships. Thank you, porn, you piece of shit. Porn just reinforces this dynamic. Porn just makes it worse for everybody. Because the man is getting this instant gratification and it's reinforcing the myth that women get turned on the same way that men do, meaning through the genitals only. So much pressure on the penis isn't it? Or the other myth that women get off on penetration without any foreplay. Which is absurd. Well, I mean some people do, I do in a lot of ways. But I have to be mentally turned on first. [And what about the quid pro quo re orgasms: OK, I will use your body. And in exchange I will give you an orgasm.] You know what? That might be enough for some people. But let's be explicit about what we want from sex, what the goal is and then negotiate from there. Do you just want an orgasm? Do you want to feel connected? Is it exercise, etc.

Thus, I identify another intervention, that is, negotiating and being explicit about what I want from sex. As it happens, I am not sure I have ever done this intervention (making a mental note to get on it.)

This next excerpt is all about focusing my sexual experience on myself versus on my partner, which was revolutionary. Incidentally, initially I was talking about the work I did with a client here, so this was spoken in the third person. Given it was aligned with my experience and was an opportunity to center things on myself, I changed it to first person, which was an interesting and uncomfortable process!

January 20, 2021 cont.,...So obviously, this idea of centering the sexual experience on myself, knowing what I want, and then experiencing through myself, versus through how my partner views me, this is the core part of my dissertation. It's just that we're now applying it to sexual intimacy; to experiencing pleasure purely for the sake of pleasure, for myself, from within myself. [This is different from] being an extension of my partner, being used, or useful, centering my experience sexually on them. The challenge [about advocating for my pleasure was] I feared I was going to be 'too difficult'. I say all the time 'it's really hard to turn me on' but is it really? Or is it that I don't know what turns me on? Or that I'm too scared to even think about it? Or if I do know, I didn't think to say anything about it because I have been socialized to not express my needs or wants.

Also the fear of what if what I want isn't aligned with what he wants? So what if? How much is what he wants not aligned with what I want? And what am I doing about it? Most of the time I go with it and sacrifice myself. And then resentment builds. This is just about equality. Plain and simple. Allowing myself to have the same thing that I give. Applying the rules to myself also.

And the way this is done matters too! Just like what I was talking about with M yesterday. If the question from my partner is "how do I turn you on?" and the implication is "so I can get what I want" there's a problem. If it's presented as "how do I turn you on because I want to support you, acknowledge you" that's also a problem, because that implies one, I'm helpless or need support and two that it's an add-on, that they're doing me a favor. If it comes from a genuine place of curiosity that's totally different.

This realization was like a lightning bolt. The repercussions seemed to be vast, not just sexually, but generally. I had originally thought self-prioritization and cohesive identity were the

critical ingredients to develop a secure attachment to the self, but I started to see that even with those things *I had never learned how to, or even that it was ok to, actually experience the world in the first person.* Let me repeat that: *I had never learned how to, or even that it was ok to, actually experience the world in the first person.* Owl had tried to show me this early on, by letting me borrow her form, but I did not fully get it until I applied it to someone else's struggle around desire.

The following day, I centered my experience on myself, and lo and behold, I had a lot of feelings ...

January 21, 2021- D: M came over yesterday to watch the inauguration and when he walked in I practically threw myself into his arms. It was such a daddy moment. I felt such enormous love. And that feeling of not just love but like safety and belonging and security. Scared the crap out of me but I went with it. And later when I was really feeling deep love, I held back from saying it, because I figured at least part of the overwhelming emotion was the poem I had just written about the pandemic and also the inauguration.

And I don't want to put it all on him... I did tell him that I was very emotional and he did check in on me which was sweet. When we got to bed the first time—I just had had that conversation with myself yesterday about needing to be turned on before having sex and so I got very confused.

Pay attention here, dear reader, because staying focused on my own experience and refusing to sacrifice myself even in the face of someone else's desire was a big leap for me. I was terrified my partner would stop desiring me if I wanted or needed something, which has happened in the past. Then, as I intentionally centered myself on my experience, I experienced some disassociation...

January 21, 2021- D cont., ...and he did get sort of defensive after asking me a number of times what he could do to cross the bridge [i.e., turn me on] ...and I just, my mind went blank. I couldn't think of what I wanted him to do. I just knew that what he was doing, and what I normally do to just get my body ready and lubricated for him, was just something I didn't want to do. Even though I knew, once we started having sex, that I was going to love it and be happy. I just couldn't do it, like I had just written all about this and even though I had identified that it does turn me on to just fuck, I felt like I was being a hypocrite. And I also felt like I needed to experiment.

Soooo we tried a whole bunch of things and ultimately I just decided to be in my body and feel what was happening and then go with it. I'm glad I did because it was an amazing fuck. But what I realized afterwards was that when I centered the experience on myself I went blank. I didn't know what I wanted, and I just froze and what I realized was that counterintuitively—well first off I talked about trying consensual nonconsent. And that's what got us actually into the sex.

But when I go blank like that, I don't want to be forced, what I want is a teacher. What I want is somebody to initiate me into pleasure. And otherwise it feels like just being left behind and I'm sure that that's just me playing out my old trauma, but actually talking about it like this makes a lot more sense, I'm going to have to tell him about it.

I did say I need a teacher. And I also said or talked a little bit about consensual nonconsent and said 'at least it's honest. At least you're owning that you're using my body'. He didn't [deny it] but he did say 'I'm not going to argue with your experience but I see it as a collaboration and negotiation' and that's true also. But yes, what I want is to be initiated. I want somebody to teach me what feels good and to make the connection for

me. And I suppose I can try to do that on my own. And maybe I will today. But at least now I have something else to experiment with.

Reading this I feel a little sad for myself. In that moment, I settled for consensual non-consent because I knew that turned me on, but what I *really* wanted—but did not allow myself to want, and hence did not advocate or hold out for—is for someone to be patient with me and give me a corrective experience. This is aligned with an idea I was able to identify the next day in therapy. I am reading this four months later and thinking “I need to do something about this.” However, will I? I hope so. [I am reading this a month after the first time I read it and commented above, and I did share this desire with M, he was perfect and it was crazy hot! Why do I continue to deny myself pleasure? Abandon the why and just start courting pleasure.]

When I first met M, I was clear with him that my sexual excitement is connected to kink. One thing that has been a central, but a severely neglected part of my sexual identity, is engaging in role play; specifically around themes of being young and cared for (by a loving guardian or father figure) or alternately being used or victimized (by men in general). Based on my early childhood trauma and socialization, it is not surprising that my inner child would think sex was the way to obtain caring, almost as a quid pro quo. It is also not surprising that as a consenting adult I would want to control the narrative around victimhood.

Getting to revisit trauma from a place of strength, rewrite it, choose it, and get pleasure from it is empowering. Bringing up these shadow parts can be integrative somehow. It makes the memories tangible instead of twisted up inside, and I can unpack them, explore, and reclaim myself.

September 11, 2020 ... [I need to decide] if I should also be looking to feed this other part of me [my taboo desires]. The whole idea that this fantasy sex stuff is really

about shamanic energy, wholeness, retrieving soul parts that were lost. That makes a lot of sense to me. Just like Bear, walk into the fear, and become more powerful, transform into what you've always been.

Facing and transforming fear born from sexual trauma can feel like the ultimate freedom. When I take back what was mine I can release what has been stored in my body against my will; integrate new experience and rewire it in the moment. It is a corrective experience, because when I revisit the trauma now, there is love and bonding after transforming the fear and pain into pleasure. Alternately, when I was a child and I was used, I was then left with alienation, secrecy, and denial. This dynamic continued as I grew into an adult before finding a way into healing that served me. However, if I am totally honest with myself, I can see that even with kink I still struggle much of the time to get past my internal manifestations of alienation, secrecy, and denial.

This role-playing was new territory for M, but as I have written elsewhere, given his acting background, he was a natural. He was especially good with the "Daddy/Princess" fantasy I had, and even though I never really went into what exactly turned me on about the scenario, as a natural caretaker and a guardian type, he was surprisingly on point simply using his intuition. I have also written a lot about how I struggled separating my feelings of love and bonding from sex, and in hindsight, it makes perfect sense that loosely playing in a highly charged psychological realm would be challenging for me. The situation was triggering given how as a child I was left alone to navigate the confusing emotions stemming from sexual abuse, and I was again alone with processing my feelings. Initially, I wrote that I was alone because "M is not psychologically minded," but since I never gave him the chance to explore my feelings. I do not know if being alone with it was necessary. I was soon to attempt to remedy that...

As part of my work with acknowledging and advocating for my desire, I thought I should finally, officially be more explicit with M about my struggle and what I needed and wanted so I could feel more secure and thus engage more actively:

January 22, 2021 - D, I just had therapy with FJ. We talked a lot about the daddy thing.

And about M and me and the struggle I'm having around taking space, but also feeling all this love for him especially, I imagine, from the little girl place. Because it feels very 'father love'. Very 'keep me safe, hold me' love. It's scary. It's also wonderful. Part of me doesn't want to talk to him about it because I'm afraid that's going to scare him off. But FJ made some great points about the importance of unpacking what's happening in that world with M.

I said I think it's important from a protective perspective, because I just don't want her [my inner child] to get hurt. And my fear is that I'm repeating actual [wounds], where I have these very deep feelings, and I'm dealing with somebody who doesn't seem to have [the same deep feelings for me]. And I think that's what I've been struggling with around all the emotion. This fear that what he's doing, how he's being, means so much to me, and it's hitting me in such a deep young place. And that he doesn't necessarily realize ... what's happening with me around that and [I don't know] what he's getting from it.

When we think about this from a kink perspective, it's really important that the ego knows what it's getting from it ...so it is important for me to have this conversation with M about this child's love, because it is a part of me, because she is precious, and because even if adult me doesn't want to stop and even if child me doesn't want to stop [getting this "love" from him], I need to know if it's safe. It's like a parent thing to do, to make sure that she's safe.

FJ was talking a lot about bringing him into my world and using this as a way to do that. Bring him into the fifth dimension ... and it also is safer for me to know that he knows ... what he's playing with. And I'm really curious what he's getting from it. ... what it means to him if anything. Because if it means nothing, genuinely means nothing, then that's too dangerous for me, I think. And that's what will help me navigate this love shit that's coming up. I'm in bed thinking about how this conversation might go here are some points [I map out the conversation I want to have with him]

1. I want to explore what we're getting out of our sex play because it's important to understand some of the psychological aspects behind it. And I'm also having a lot of feelings that are tied up in it and that I shouldn't be withholding. And I'm curious about your experiences as well.
2. Because this is intense psychological stuff typically there are rules to it agreed-upon rules or agreements and we don't have much of that. So I'm putting rules on myself that I'm not sure are appropriate. And I'm probably not setting rules that may be appropriate.
3. What I get out of it: being held, feeling cherished, being able to trust, being able to love openly and fearlessly from a place of innocence (here's my challenge?) I get to be small, I get to be led (trust.) I get to look up to him, and any other number of things. What is it that you get? Do you have any concerns about what I'm sharing? Do you feel those things happening? Any curiosity about it?
4. One of the things I realized after looking at this idea of loving openly, worshiping in a way, is that a. It's healing for me in a variety of ways; b. I'm holding back a lot because I don't know if it's OK/welcome to feel what I'm feeling and

therefore I'm feeling alone with a deeply intense and personal interpersonal experience; c. I need to make sure that I'm safe, as a parent to the part of myself, I need to have a better understanding of your motivations and how it feels to you and what it means to you/what you get out of it—maybe remove→ because an old wound of mine is feeling deeply for people that seem to be incapable of feeling deeply in return, and I frankly don't trust my picker other than to pick what I know

5. I also want to give back to you through your own healing. Do you know wounds that are being addressed through this play?
6. One of the things that I feel like I can offer or that we can get from this play from a healing perspective, is helping you integrate some of your parts. So you have divine feminine, and you have deep intellect, and you have emotions, and I feel like this play can help bridge those things for you if you choose to allow yourself to engage in this with an open heart, meaning to feel along with experience and maneuver and I can help you navigate your emotional experience to help you expand and bring you closer to wholeness
7. I'm not looking for guarantees or commitment beyond our current level of partnership, but knowing your intentions and exploring your curiosity and capacity can help me make decisions related to my attachment and openness to more fully engage, give back, and share more layers of my emotional experience related to you and us from these other parts.

I felt much better after mapping all of this out, and I believed I was finally ready to talk to M about this miraculous and torturous world of emotion I was in when I was with him ...

January 23, 2021 - D: I told M I loved him today and he said that he loved me too. We talked a lot about me getting more time and his limitations. It felt very good to just be honest about it. I recognize that we're kind of in a no-win situation [we explored ideas] and I said it's good to have [more time] as an option but maybe I just need something [someone] else in the meantime. So I guess we'll work it out.

There is that ENM thing again; popping up when M and I are getting closer to each other!

...more importantly [!] we talked about the daddy/princess stuff and it was very clear that he was getting a lot from it. It also really turned him on to talk about it. So I didn't get all the clarification I was looking for, I did get more confidence around it. I could see that he got something from it, too, something healing and I guess that's enough for me right now.

As far as commitment and everything else, I think I'm OK with it, I think I'm OK with taking the risk. I did talk to him about a bunch of these things, it was not nearly as pretty and clear as it was last night [mapping it out for myself], but I feel I shared with him that I'm a sensitive being, and I need to be taken seriously, and I think that he does take me seriously, at least he's trying. I think he is simpler than me when it comes to a lot of this shit, I think it's enough for him to feel like he's turned on, he's turning me on...

I am very tentative here, "I guess that's enough for me right now" and "I think I'm ok with it, I think I'm ok with taking the risk," which tells me a variety of things that may or may not be trustworthy: I was unsatisfied with the conversation but felt secure enough to accept M as he is and not push it. Alternately, I could have just been too scared to push it: starting when I first began remembering childhood sexual abuse, I follow a rule in my personal life that I do not engage in discussions unless, expecting the worst, I believe I will be comfortable with whatever and however someone may respond. I wanted to be brave but wasn't ready to assert myself.

Reading this again and witnessing the denial, spin, and justifications I am making (some of which I call out above and following this in brackets) as I seek to analyze this, [I am guessing] I was not actually secure enough. I was not ready to expose myself more [possibly for fear that I would fumble the conversation, then M would disappoint me, and it would all be a set up to confirm my anxiety]. Instead, I let myself down. I used suppression of my voice to avoid what I fantasized would be M's response. I focused on feeling satisfied that it turned him on and that he was getting something from it, versus making sure I was safe through confirming that M knew what he was playing with and was prepared to shoulder the related responsibility.

In fact, my first response to this excerpt four months later was simply: "I *did* tell M what I wanted related to being initiated, and it was a success." Talk about positive reframing! I still am not 100% sure M knows how vulnerable I am in relation to this play, and part of me still does not know if that feels safe. I mostly feel like I am responsible, and M has proven himself trustworthy, thus I am keeping myself safe. ← these lines illustrate how my analysis and justification process works. I had to reread this section three times and really consider it before I was able to be [more] honest with myself. I do not think there is one truth. I think this is all an accurate representation of different parts of me. In the end, I chose to be as brave as I could be and as generous as I could be with M's different way of communicating. That has paid off to date as I do not resent him, and I continue to experience pleasure when I am with him. When I do not, I talk about it, and I am far from perfect, but I am getting better at doing that more directly.

The next day, I can see [in hindsight] the outcome of not advocating for reassurance and more space to process the daddy/princess stuff. I was not aware at the time, but I believe the outcome started with increased anxiety, insecurity, emotional shut down, and withdrawal, and eventually turned into self-advocacy:

January 24, 2021- D When we got into bed yesterday afternoon, I was feeling really shut down. And really I guess sort of disassociated? I didn't really feel much for M. And I just felt the low-grade anxiety, like what I was feeling today too. So he suggested we work that out in bed. And when we got in bed I just couldn't ground. And then he asked me what I needed and I said I didn't really know, but I wanted him to try to teach me. And what he did was he tried a number of things and asked if I liked them, if I felt good. Normally I wouldn't like that. But I really liked it. He was touching more of my body. And paying attention to me. And that's what I really needed I guess. I needed that help.

And so now we know that that's one way to ground me but we also know that it's OK for me to say what I want! In the past I would've turned it around and been like "hey, why don't you remember I told you I wanted a teacher, blah blah blah" I would've come up with all these ways to criticize. And instead it was like he genuinely wanted to know and so I genuinely told him or said at least 'I'd like to try this, maybe it'll work?' And it did! So, more progress!

And also he's great...he was so receptive and open to me wanting to talk about things and really encouraging and really present. And aware when he wasn't. And he said at one point "have I given you any reason to fear telling me things?" and I said "well yeah, but not because you're untrustworthy, because I'm very sensitive." Anyway it all worked out. So I can stop worrying about sharing my feelings and wanting to have deep conversations or sharing my fears when they come up. Well, not every time they come up :-)) but when they're blocking my ability to be present or engage. Because he wants me to engage, he wants me present. And more importantly, I want to be engaged and present.

The more bravery I have, the more direct I am without being defensive. The more direct I am

without being defensive, the better the outcome is. Obviously, this is something I “know,” but Being, it takes bravery. I did a journey with my friend JK to try to integrate all I was learning, and it seems like a good summary:

Journey with JK 1/24/21: today, I asked how can I love more openly more freely, what tools do I need? And I was immediately in a wolf pack and as I’m running and howling I realize I’m a wolf pup. And I’m kind of bummed because I really want to be running but I’m just a pup and mother licks my face and encourages me to accept my size and I’m like “no I want to be big, I’m going to run!” and so this vicious wolf snarls at me and then eats me and I’m running and realize I shouldn’t be an adult yet, I’m still a pup. So he throws me up in human form and then I transform back into a wolf pup. So I’m playing and chasing butterflies and pouncing on things and rolling around and filled with joy and excitement to learn everything. I want to learn all the things! Mother says ‘we’re going hunting, you can’t come, you’re not ready.’ And I’m like ‘I’m ready!’ And she says ‘no, you can and need to practice these skills first, you can’t just jump right in and have expertise, it’s dangerous.’ So they all run off and I’m in a cave and I’m jumping around and having fun digging and a mouse pops up. And I’m playing with her and she’s not amused. I pounce on her, she’s definitely not amused. She pops her head back up and sort of admonishes me and then climbs on my back. We walk out of the cave a little bit and Bear is there and they are like ‘all right let’s go do some Bear stuff’. So excited, I became a Bear cub! But then I’m like, I’m too far away from the cave. I’m too far from home and I have to go back. So I go back to the cave and soon the adults are back with a kill. It’s a deer. And they’re all eating the deer and I saunter over to get some and mother turns and snarls at me, barks, yells at me, and I pull back whimpering, and she says, ‘no you’re not

bad, it's just that it's dangerous here, it's not time for you, and you're not big enough, don't just jump right in, wait for me to give this to you.' So I have my ego bruised but I look over and see Deer whose eyes are open and she's dead. And I'm very conflicted because it smells good. I want some but I feel like it's cruel. Soon mother tears off a piece and gives it to me, drops it by my feet and I bow to Deer several times and then thank her and pick up the meat and I'm prancing around all proud of myself like Magick does when he has a stick. And Mouse comes and tries to eat some and I'm like 'back up!' So I prance my way into the cave and stop before going in and look up to see Deer spirit. He tells me it's OK. So I go in and I eat deer and realize now deer is part of me. And Mouse eats some and I thank the wolves as Wolf and then I turn into a human and come back home. Four minutes early.

So some key takeaways: Not jumping in too soon ... It's OK to practice skills. It's OK to get feedback. Sometimes it's good for you. I shouldn't take it personally, I should learn from it. I should learn from people that know. I should wait to have things given to me. I should be grateful for what's given to me. And I shouldn't reject what is given to me because I feel conflicted. I should live in joy and innocence and openness and play. And that only goes away when I want too much too soon. I get cocky or I'm not satisfied with the play because I want to be big.

This journey reminds me a lot of the conversation with M last night about the dirty princess stuff. And his joy of being a mentor ... I told him people would genuinely not believe how much I trust him. How much I follow him. I don't know how to follow. We know this about me. I trust him, I don't know. I said I wasn't sure if I could but that I did anyway; I believed that I could and that I needed to know that he respected me and

also was sensitive to me because I'm sensitive. And I don't want to go back to being a hard ass, not at all. And that doesn't mean that I'm overly dependent either, that doesn't mean that I can't provide for myself or others. ...

Madge and I are walking up the back part of Panthera. We went to the secret place this morning because it was so cold. Also I've been drinking way too much. And I need to take the next three nights off, certainly the next two nights. No question. No drinking. Also I need to eat clean. Because I have nothing. I have not been.

Rachel I love you. It's OK to be a wolf pup. It's OK to love, it's OK to not rush and just Be, enjoy. In joy. Play is good! I don't have to know everything. I don't have to engage in everything. I don't have to feel lonely. I wonder what Mouse signified in this [journey], maybe Mouse with all of her senses... that it's important to use all my senses? To listen? Mouse always says to listen. It's OK to accept care. It's OK to accept the unknown and trust that things will be OK. And not try to rush into everything or take more than I'm ready for or do more than I'm ready for. There's time. Practicing is not dangerous. Innocence and vulnerability are not dangerous. Also it's OK to be proud! It's OK to prance around! It's OK to try on different parts.

I was getting reassurance from my spirit animals that it was ok to want to learn from M and to be young, open, and free. Putting that into practice immediately, I had invited M and his son to come over that night:

January 24, 2021: ... he sent me a Marco Polo saying they weren't coming tonight. And I knew that was going to be the case. And I was sad but not sad. Well, I was anxious, like it was too much. But I was happy that I asked. And I'm fine that he said no. I don't feel like I look stupid for offering. And a part of me is very relieved because it

was too many days in a row with him frankly. So it'll be good to have a few days off. I think it was just very intense last night and yesterday. Which isn't bad. But doesn't have to be so serious all the time right? And alone time is necessary. So that's what I'm going to do.

It was a big deal that I invited him over. If I asked for something sexually, that feels like high stakes, because if I am rejected I am not sure I will be okay. Testing out low risk rejection was an attempt to build confidence, and it worked. I was okay with the outcome even though it did not go the way I had hoped. I live with a lot of conflict about asking for things. For instance, I want people to give me feedback, set boundaries, advocate for themselves, and logically, any response is a good response, but emotionally I take most of those things personally. It may not directly affect my relationships because I will most likely respond in "an appropriate" highly differentiated way, but inside it will hurt. I am learning that will not only lead to me suppressing more, but it will also lead to my backlog of projections and indirect, passive aggressive behavior. What I hope for is that someone will be curious about what I feel and be able to tolerate it, and for the most part I am training that person: me.

Back to the Fearful-Avoidant Experience

After working with the idea of centering my sexual experience on myself, I then realized during a hike that perhaps I am not centering my day-to-day experience on myself either:

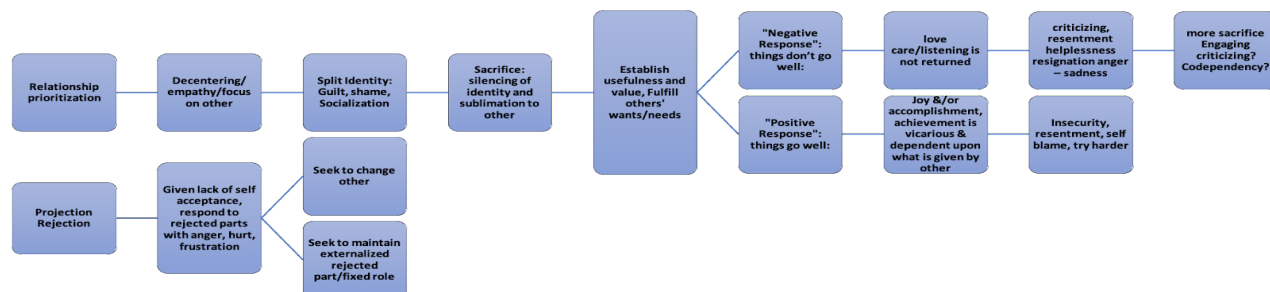
January 25, 2021-D, I just walked in the house after a Panthera walk and I was thinking about what I had written in my other section about the process around engaging in the world relationship first etc. etc. and I started thinking holy shit, is that what's happening every time M comes to my house? I'm shifting from being focused on prioritizing and centralizing myself to centralizing him? Maybe that's why it's such a hard transition! I

need to test this out! Because at first glance, it makes a ton of sense! Sublimating myself, putting his needs/wants first and also, somehow silencing my needs/wants so even I can't hear them!

So what's the big deal about this discovery? It's not just about "knowing" what's going on, because that only takes me so far. It's about letting me label and externalize the experience so I can work with it. Try new things, see if I can alleviate some of the confusion and pain I feel when I struggle to 'transition' from Rachel world to shared space. Right now, I just get 'weird' and when I look at it from this angle, I can imagine that I'm struggling to hold onto myself but (hypothesis) I'm basically disassociating, almost like a mini transformation or shape shift.

Here, I am seeing the implications of my decentering, and I am excited to discover my "weirdness" each time M comes over can potentially be cured by not losing myself to him or our relationship each time he enters the room (i.e., living in the first person). I am also considering this "weirdness" may be dissociative—that I become "other" and thus lose my identity and groundedness. In doing this I rely on other to indirectly ground me, and we know how that turns out. On my hike, I mapped out the process of how I had previously engaged interpersonally:

Figure 2



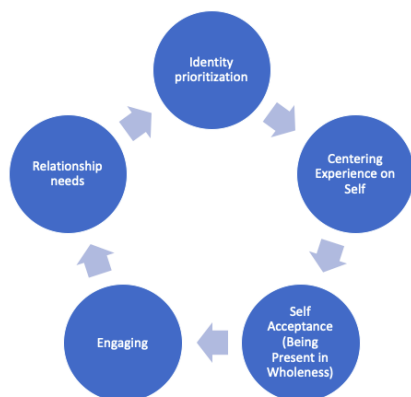
Prior Interpersonal Engagement Process

Essentially, when engaging interpersonally, I either prioritized the relationship and others, or rejected and projected suppressed parts of myself onto others while everything about me and my needs was indirect. In other words, unless I was alone, there was no centering on myself.

I have accused every partner I have had of being passive aggressive. Given my overarching assertiveness, I never once considered that maybe I was being passive aggressive, too. In reality, my experience did not even factor in unless it was reactive or in response to how the other person acted. I decided to map out the new process I had been practicing.

Figure 3

New Interpersonal Engagement Process



In this new model, my aim was to prioritize my identity, center the experience on myself, process through self-acceptance (when necessary), engage interpersonally, *and then* consider relationships needs. Logically, it makes perfect sense, yet tying this into my emotional experience gets a little more complicated.

When I focus on my experience and center myself there, I am empowered and able to engage interpersonally... sometimes. If I focus on my experience and center myself when I am sad or anxious, I can become distraught; but then it passes, and I can go back to engaging with others. When I get anxious, start thinking and focus externally on other, or start criticizing myself I get caught in the thinking/anxiety loop, which can spiral into despair or result in a “eureka!” Those realizations may feel great in the moment but are quickly swallowed up by my emotional experiences when I re-engage outside of the empowered thinking place.

Two days later, I tried the experiment of shifting my perspective to center on myself with positive results, so there was no downward spiral ...

January 27, 2021- D, Last night I practiced what I talked about [on January 25] as far as centering my experience on myself. And holy crap it worked! M came over and I was totally focused on myself and there was no transition, I just really enjoyed being with him and it didn't get weird.

When I say, “centering my experience on myself” and “I was totally focused on myself” I mean that literally. I was attuned to myself, grounded in how I was feeling in the moment, meeting him from my own lens, then staying there regardless of his actions. Prior to this, I would have been thinking “what does he need? How can I make him happy?” or I would have been preparing for what he wanted and self-objectifying “He is going to want to have sex, how will I respond to him wanting sex? Will he be upset if I don’t want it? What if he doesn’t want it? Should I fix my hair or makeup? Will he like what I am wearing? Oh no, did I remember to pluck that stray hair out of my chin?” etc.

I would be so focused on trying to please him, never once would I be relaxed and think, “What would I like in this moment?” Instead, I locked myself away somewhere. It is a strange experience, just going blank like that, almost floating off into space. Is it really that threatening to imagine that in the moment my wants and needs and personality deserve space? I imagine my migraines think so.

This is similar to the implications of centering the sexual experience on myself. I am still practicing focusing on what it feels like, if I want something different, or ways to actively engage with my partner. I constantly need to redirect my attention from what I look like or from worrying about what he may be seeing that may turn him off. This saddens me, but I am hopeful that over time I will gain more confidence with being in my body and experiencing through my lens. There is the rub, because my lens is so critical given the internalized body shame, there is almost more of a chance that I will be viewed positively from the outside. One more reason vanquish self-objectification, but how to do it??

February comes and M and I continue to have enormous joy together and connective sex. I continue to be mad for him, and then when I am alone, I return to feeling like I am *going* mad.

When I am calm, I try to find and center my experience on myself to ensure I do not get more lost. I put identifying and asking M for what I want into practice when we were apart too, and even though it was scary it also had positive outcomes:

February 2, 2021- D, Last night I was feeling really lonely, we had a snowstorm and M couldn't be with me. And I don't know, I was just craving closeness, craving attention maybe? I tried a number of things, none of which included alcohol, which I was very proud of, also I didn't use food. I was sitting with it for hours and finally I was like "you know what? I'm just going to ask him to send me a little reassurance." So I texted him, just asking when he got a chance if he could send me something he's looking forward to with us or a kindness about me. He wrote back very quickly [with a list that reassured me] And I felt better.

I didn't judge myself for doing this. And I didn't play any games. I needed something and I asked for it without drama and it worked. In the past this would've been drama! I would've spiraled into "I'm lonely! This relationship isn't working! Are you even real?" And then probably would've started catastrophizing and then by the time I reached out, I would be really upset as if he had done something wrong even when he didn't ... soooo, no need for drama is my point, and asking directly for what you want seems to work.

I was telling JT that there's no point in trying to use strategy with this man, or playing any games, he's not going to read into anything, and that's actually really nice. I can just be straight forward.

My experiment is working. I am prioritizing myself, self-soothing, allowing myself to feel, advocating for myself, and staying in reality, even when it pains me. I am living in integrity with

myself. My identity is becoming clearer and more cohesive, and while I am still fighting with societal norms, I am not acting out according to them. I am advocating for myself and trying to act in integrity and alignment... until increased intimacy happens. Then...

February 3, 2021- D, yesterday M came over and first thing he followed up on a couple things I had texted him and that felt really good. Later last night, I listened to his music and really felt for him, and also was fearful that I no longer inspire him and that what he needs to be inspired is longing [not having access to me]. I felt insecure.

I asked him to see me, I needed to be seen. He wasn't sure how to do it. So I told him I would show him by seeing him. So I did. ...And I felt such enormous love for him. It's overwhelming. We moved to bed and... when I asked for something different he got a bit defensive ... And I [reassured him]. He was genuinely confused [but after more exploration] he touched me differently and I got really really turned on. And that excited him too and I thought for sure I would orgasm from him touching me but I didn't. It was sexy AF, but afterwards although it was super hot, I still felt unseen. I also was pretty drunk and migrainey.

I advocated for myself sexually with some positive results, but it was not enough to calm my anxiety about feeling intense love for him. Things get worse in the night ...

February 3, 2021- D: I was up at 2 am just spinning. Could not fall asleep. I took pills and then masturbated and finally fell asleep. He heard me [masturbate] and held me. He held me close all night. I feel pain from loving him. I don't know how to manage the feelings. I cried this am after sex, migraine and tired and love and loneliness. He held me and was sweet, offering to help, but of course [he did] not [offer] to stay with me. I

brought up wanting to spend more time at his house and he said ‘yes let’s figure that out.’

I then slept on my couch until noon thirty!

Later I [tried to check in on the night before via text, he responded with affection but didn’t ask for my experience] I hearted that but I also have feelings, I also wanted to explore my experience. We’ll see if tomorrow he picks up that thread. I guess it’s better that I don’t share bc what could I say? “I feel like I love you too much, much more than you feel, and it hurts”?? Because I’ve tried that before and he disagreed.

Am I upset that he disagreed? Because if so, I am confused; is that not a good thing based on my fear? Alas, no:

...And the next thing is polyamory. Needing other love, other places to put my love. And what will that do? I love this relationship. I deeply do. I want him. I want more of him. I don’t want others. But if I can’t have him, how long can I manage? I will be working more soon, so I suppose I shouldn’t do anything drastic but I’m tired of the hurting. Maybe if it wasn’t Covid. I don’t know. I just know that I ache to see him and I don’t believe he feels the same. Though during first sex yesterday he told me he had missed me and I was surprised. I was even more surprised when he immediately followed that with “did you miss me?” Uh yah! Do we need more communication? Will I ruin things if I continue to push for more communication or if I don’t? I don’t know what to do. I suppose I should just ask him. JT suggested I direct some of my overabundance of love back towards myself and perhaps I’m not doing that enough.

I am again worrying that I need another relationship to distract me and soothe my anxiety. I do not want to bring all my analysis to M. It is not sexy, and he does not have the space for it.

However, I am overwhelmed with feelings and worries, which alternate between “I love him

more than he loves me” and “I need more attention, he doesn’t see me, he’s too self-involved.”

February 5, 2021- D, The last few days have been a little convoluted but last night I went to M’s under the guise of him taking care of me. He worked and worked and went to the M show and I wasn’t interested in it. Luckily I had a book and I distracted myself and just disengaged. I told him to come find me when he was ready to be present. It didn’t happen until after dinner and even then it was in and out. I talked to him a bit about [feeling unseen]. We went upstairs and had sex and it was really good sex. Foreplay and talking and afterwards, he was saying that it feels like he’s high the last couple times because of how intense it’s been and I said that’s what I equate with love. And he sort of acknowledged that was my perspective but I didn’t much care either way because it’s true for me. We went to sleep and I had a bad dream about losing my teeth which led to this M character losing interest in having sex with me. I woke up this morning at 5 AM distraught. I wrote a poem... And in general I was just sad. And upset.

Fur, Fins, Scales, and Feathers 2/5/21

Fur fluffed and on display you cook for me, ply me with whiskey and wine. Push me away.

Colors too bright I shy, crouch in corner couch like hungry bird, feral cat, pretty puppy longing for pats but scared so...until, “Come hither upstairs, my dear,” you strip me too fast for resistance

I stand before you pink and plucked, bare and dear once more

I’m eaten in ferocious, relentless famine-fueled gulps

when near nothing left you rest while I seek air, regather bits and tears pieced together into patch-quilt, into semblance of what I hoped to have but frozen-weak I watched float away

at night you drape your limbs over and through like snow, like vines disguised as tree, heavy and reaching, hair tickling like fresh leaves, rushing for the fall

your cock dances against me, bright and hungry feathers, arranged and fanned for maximum effect and I still

Am I silenced by your colors?

Are you too bright or I too dull?

Does your light eclipse my moonchild, whimpering in darkness-fright with
broken-tooth dreams, denied your fucking and lovelust?

How long can I pretend we are of the same species? That your howl and my hoot
make conversation, harmony?

Have I waited too long to build my nest? to migrate south for survival-light? to
leave my perch to taste the bluest sky beckoning but muted by our shadows?

I have not looked away despite the glare
I have always been too bold, too confident, too sure I know what's true and north
yet now I follow you, a duckling in hawk's den
my python no match for your bull, I slither about, watching for the last kick to
stomp me into mudpuddles dressed as weddingbed lit by candles made of bees broken
and lost

Are things truly dire or do I need a hug? or to light something on fire?
Can I escape or must I?
Can I wait the endless hours for minutes of pleasure swallowed too soon by
darkest slumber?

Can I resist the desperate warmth of February?
Will I aim for Venice but find myself in Delaware, homeless and friendless with
\$2 to spare? Are you leading me down an alley or into a field lush with life?

Can I open my eyes or are they already wide with hope, colored by fear, smudged
with past, lost in dears I wish were darlings I know are decoys made of glittering gravel?
but do I know? Do you?
Does it matter what I do?
Should I leave or stay?
Dream or wake?
Be or shake in terror under covers warmed by beams that seek your skylight,
bathing me in moon-speak whispering, whispering my name? would I even daign to
answer or would I freeze, waiting for the next pounding, wanting that and holding
holding holding if only in the blankets of night

Is any of this real?
Have I been duped again? A simple female seeking daddy who always shows and
always, always leaves again? Is it enough? Am I enough? Will the crying ever stop? The
rage?

Should I just huddle next to you, a baby-bear seeking slumber, huddled under
your furry limbs near to crushed but snout peeking out for just-enough-air to greet the
spring?

Near three seasons in I wonder, will we make it to 4 or 5 before the fire-storm?
Can I hold out that long? Longer? Can you?

Is this just dawn-confusion or have I found a truth? One of many timelines I could walk with you, slouched and slippery or head high, side by side, or must I walk alone, always alone? Can I choose? or do I slip into my river nature, find a leaf and recline, riding waves and storms, scales flashing iridescent in whatever light can find me?

Will I flicker through, nibbling each rock and swimmer hoping for a meal, an answer, another path only to find in dream-eagle I soar but in life-fish I circle circle circle tiny pond until caught, yanked from stifling-safety to fire-pan, filleted and fried in butter and thyme.

February 5, 2021 cont., ... By the time M woke up and wanted to have sex I said “No, and sadly I want you but the only power I feel like I have right now is saying no to something I want” and that’s how it felt, like I was powerless, like disengaging didn’t do anything, engaging doesn’t do anything, he’s in his own world. And plus it wasn’t just him, it’s not that I’m really that upset with him, but it’s not enough. Going over to his house like this and having an hour of conscious time before fucking and then going to sleep, I need more than that during this pandemic. It’s not enough for me. I’m starving, dehydrated, it’s famine for me. And I know that he is stressed, but I am too. And I need to be seen. And I need connection. And he’s my only outlet and it’s not really his fault is it? I feel lonely, confused, madly in love, and lost and found. I am in a lot of pain. I am also starting to feel like M, who has always lived in first person, is too focused on himself, and that in stepping back and making space for him (living in second person), I am being silenced. I try to navigate my overwhelming anxiety and upset by centering my experience on and advocating for myself, but I am still holding back how I feel:

February 5, 2021 cont.... And so I said to him, “you’re not my problem, but given that you’re one of my only solutions, it’s very hard when you can’t be present. Then I don’t know what to do, because I’m needy. I need. And I feel like I’ve been in solitary confinement...”

He left to go to his dentist appointment, and I talked to RH and a number of other people, just freaking the fuck out. [Hold on I thought I heard a snowmobile] anyway, not knowing what I was even freaking out about, just, like, I've had enough, I can't do it anymore! I took a shower and basically was about to leave when M got in touch and wanted to go to breakfast and I said "no, I don't want to do that, I want to have sex" and he [logistically couldn't] and of course I understand, I just was sad that I missed our morning sex and we missed our afternoon sex yesterday because [his son] was home. Anyway, he came home to hug me and I tried to hold back my feelings but the reality was I was angry. And so [we processed] things we could try so that he could be more present and grounded when we're together [given his stress] ...

... And I'm freaking out! And there's just no connection. And I want him. And also I don't wanna take on his emotions that's why the night before I just disengaged. Because I was taking on his emotions. So we talked about trying something new as far as grounding next time we saw each other and then it was all: "have a good day, talk to you tomorrow" but I was really upset. I just walked away without looking back. But he was already onto the next thing, because that's what he does. Earlier on we talked about that, he was saying "well, you're not a side dish, there's just you and [my son] and work" and I'm like, 'yeah, a side dish.' And he said "well it doesn't seem that way [to me] when you're not with me" and I'm like "well, it doesn't for you but it does for me! That's your experience and that's true for you, but for me when you're gone, you're gone, when I'm out of your sight and out of your communication I'm gone from you, you're gone from me." I don't know, it wasn't even really about him I guess, it's just this whole fucking pandemic and this isolation and so much aloneness and just a lot of feelings!

When my feelings finally become too much, I give in and attempt to share my experience:

So I texted him after I left the house and was sitting in my car: “I’m angry” and ... he came into my car and I said “look I’m sick of being good, I’m sick of holding back all my feelings, I’m sick of playing small. I needed to play small for a while. And I enjoy it and that’s a part of me, I never really get to do it, so it’s great but I’m not small all the time and I don’t wanna play small when I’m not feeling small and I don’t wanna hold back my feelings because I’m scared.” And I said that it wasn’t him, he wasn’t forcing me to do this, because that’s what he was worried about. I’m doing it, I’m playing small, I’m playing calm to his frenzy. And he is getting frenzied mostly each time I express upset.

So I was like “I’m gonna bring up my upset and I want to take up space and I want you to do the same, I don’t want you to hold it all in and be good so that the only time you’re able to express things is in bursts like I’m doing, or whenever I express emotion.” He’s got to own his own shit, so I can and I have to own my own shit. And I said, “I’ve been holding back because I’m scared that I’m gonna be too much or whatever but so be it if I am.” I told him I wasn’t going anywhere and he said he wasn’t going anywhere either... But he was saying whenever I’m upset his first thought is “what have I done wrong,” and I [reassured him that] he’s not my problem, I just have my own emotions and I need to be able to share them and not have them be taken up by him ...

I also talked a little bit about how because we are solace for each other, when we’re together and it doesn’t work out exactly as we want, it’s so deeply disappointing and painful, because it’s really our only escape! So there’s a lot of pressure on both of us to be good and to make sure that our time together is joyful, but life doesn’t always work

like that. And I don't always work like that, I've got a lot of different emotions. When I left [we texted our appreciation and gratitude for each other]

So in general the man wants me to be open and most of my holding back is a reflection of me and I gotta be able to be myself and I'm gonna do that, even if that invades space or triggers him or whatever I think part of what's happening is that because he gets upset every time I'm upset I'm not sharing my upset and that's fucking bullshit right? Fuck that. It's not good for anybody.

When I finally break down and share my emotions, I am able to see that: (a) they are about me and not about him; b. he can and will tolerate my emotional experience though he does get upset when I am upset; and c. holding back my feelings is not helping anyone, and in fact not only does it make my emotional experience convoluted and increasingly unbearable (see poem) it can also be unintentionally rather manipulative. I processed my feelings the next day:

February 6, 2021- D I trust him to drive himself. I trust him to decide for himself. I trust him to figure things out, I trust him to grow and reach. He does not need me to fix or guide him. He does not need me. I disregarded my feelings then put them on him and he didn't like it. I criticized him and made him insecure bc I was insecure it didn't help either of us. I want him and need him for different things. For body things. For mirror things. Not to save him or be saved. I feel awoken. I feel like I'm just learning what it's like to be an adult and be with an adult. I don't want to pressure him. I don't want him to cave for me. I want him strong and centered and happy.

I don't want to work through shit with him. I'm ok when we disappoint each other. I'm scared when he's insecure or when he's defensive so I need to work on that but mostly I see him as an adult and I think I can trust him to make solid decisions for

himself just maybe not for me. And that's ok. It's 11:17pm on a Saturday night. Amazing sex, so much feeling after realizing the above. I'm happy to receive what is offered to me.

I need not be scared that he is not into me. He is but it's balanced with what he needs to do to be an adult. I'm not the center. If I was I wouldn't have the great I do have.

I do not believe this idea of centering my experience on myself and then sharing how I feel with M is a stand-alone fix, but I am imagining it could have been the missing ingredient for me to get out of the thinking loop. It is like the figurative mirror exercises regarding projections: each time I would get angry or upset, I would bring my attention back to me to assess how it was reflective of me and my actions or thoughts.

The poetry also feels helpful in some ways. Each poem I write brings me enormous relief because I finally feel heard by myself, and at the same time they cause anxiety because M is not able or perhaps willing to engage with me; he does not express interest or respond to my art other than on a practical level, another thing that I am disappointed about. I argue with myself that I understand he is more literal, and I suggest that my need for more creative and emotional engagement can be remedied by ENM. Thus, I feel confident, strong, and engaged, and then I crash again; seek to run or sabotage:

February 7, 2021- D, This morning we woke up and had great sex of course and when I left him after breakfast, where we laughed and laughed, I thought 'Yes, I'm too attached, I'm fantasizing about the future I'm closing things down, I need to bring up polyamory again.' And I'm really scared to do it. And when I talk to myself about that, why was I so scared? It wasn't just because I was worried about his reaction. It was because I was worried about him saying that he's going to have to see people too. And the thought of sharing him with anyone else makes me want to scream! It feels so unfair! I suppose the

reality is, if he still saves those three nights for me, and we do the same amount of talking, then he can go and be with whomever else he wants, but not having sex with somebody else. No way!

But also it doesn't have to get to that! I mean, I could just say this is something that I want to try for a bit, and before anything actually happens with anybody we'll talk about it. I can't just shut the whole thing down because I'm afraid of what could ultimately happen! Maybe I'll try it and I won't like it, maybe he'll try it and he won't like it, maybe I'll try it and won't want to have sex, maybe I'll try and I will wanna have sex. I don't think I want any more masculine energy but what if I meet a guy that's more emotionally available? That's what this is all about. [next day: is it? Bc he is emotionally available when you go to him directly with emotions! You are the person hurting you and we will find a way to help you stop that]

My solution to my feeling "too much" for M is to deflect, focus on ENM, or on M and his reactions and experience, conveniently forgetting he *can* actually be emotionally available, though I catch that the next day. I want to alleviate my anxiety, but I worry that going down the ENM route will increase it. Still, I feel trapped, and I am starting to try to justify what, in hindsight, does not seem like an emotionally safe course of action:

February 7, 2021- D, cont. So I can tell I'm really shut down around [needing someone to engage with me emotionally] and so it's probably time to bring it back up. And if you can't handle it then that's more information. Because the pressure on him, it's no good. It doesn't work and I'm not gonna do it anymore. And I'm not gonna sacrifice myself past where I'm comfortable, or where I feel like it's unfair or imbalanced.

Also, I'm really insecure about him and about us. Is that just me? I mean it's obvious that the guy cares about me that he, I guess, loves me in the way that he can, that he thinks about me and prepares for me and tries to improve for me and that I'm very important in his life, but I just don't feel like it, is it just the words? I don't understand! His actions show it but because he's not emotionally available, and maybe that's not even it, because he's tangential? Because he is distracted all the time? Because he's not actively curious about me? I mean that's the thing.

He doesn't use a lot of words and he doesn't act curious about me, he's very self-focused, I'm very self-focused too, but that's the reality of this man, he's doing his own thing, and he's interested in his own experience and ... other people's experiences are just not something he focuses on. And you know what, that's fine. He focuses on my experience around food and caretaking and sex. And if he's not focused on my emotional experience then that just means that I need to also be with somebody that provides that, because he doesn't do that naturally. He will do it, but he's got very little energy. And so part of it is me finding the right time to get it and part of me is getting it elsewhere. Because I need it. And it's OK that he doesn't provide it. But that doesn't make it so I don't need it. And that's what polyamory is about isn't it. And I think he should be able to accept that ... I don't have to feel bad about not being everything for him and he doesn't have to feel bad about not being everything to me. Right? I don't know, at the very least we should talk about it and we're going to.

Soooo I think like [a friend who also practices ENM] was saying her partner said to her, 'it's been in my heart to try this, it feels important for me, and I really, really don't wanna fuck things up between us' and maybe that's the perspective I need to take and I

need to think about it fully from my perspective, not worrying about what he's going to do or what he's gonna think or say. He can worry about that, not me. I can handle anything that comes up.

Last night was very difficult, but we handled it, and even though I got scared, very scared, eventually it all worked out. And maybe I am too much for him. But then I'm too much for him and I need to move on, at the very least I need to diversify. I need to readjust my perspective: the way I'm looking at this, thinking about it, engaging in it. And there would be Covid rules too... So I don't need to get ahead of myself, it's just one step at a time, one minute at a time. I love you, we need to take care of ourselves, we need to put ourselves first always, it has to be from our perspective.

I am convinced M is not able to provide what I need and that I have every right to seek it elsewhere.

Logically, ENM makes a lot of sense to me, as long as you can handle the anxiety of being in a relationship where you *choose* to be together versus "commit." It is unreasonable to expect you can get everything from one person, yet the way monogamy is structured and practiced often seems to lead to extensive relational difficulties. At this stage, I am feeling like I cannot give myself all I need. Covid is limiting my ability to connect with others, and I do not know how to get the rest from M. In fact, I am working to be satisfied with what I *can* get from him versus wanting him to be different, which is what has contributed to the destruction of every other relationship I have had...

February 7, 2021- D, cont., That was at the secret place this morning. This afternoon I'm sitting on the couch after eating too much and just want to cry and cry. I feel so lonely. I miss M. Or do I? I just want to be held. I am not fully holding myself. I

reached out to M and he responded as M does. I can't get what I want/need from him. It's painful. But he is who he is. And I need to stop wanting and wishing for him to be different. He can be emotionally available but only on his terms when he can be.

I will never be central to him and I guess it's maybe churning all my childhood shit up. Even if I'm clearly a priority, I will never be a top priority. I knew that from the beginning. I will never be chosen by him. I mean maybe once [his son] is gone, but see what I did there? So, can I accept never being chosen from my exclusive partner? From my primary partner? I think that's a key question I need to ask myself as the person who must choose me.

I also just realized that 'never' is not true. If I was in an accident or I truly needed help he would prioritize me, but not for every emotional swing or insecurity I have. The boundaries are great, and yes, painful, but they provide fodder for growth. He does prioritize me above a lot of other things regularly so it's not that I'm just not a priority or that I'm making more of things than he is. Like I'm not delusional in my feelings for him.

So.... How would things be different if he did choose me? If he ran to me every time I'm in a mood, what then? What would be the cost to him? To me? Is this something I just need to get over? What should I do?

I think just pointing this out to myself is helping me feel better. It's the emotion itself, the old wound I need to work with, not change the situation or the person, right? And all the other men that did choose me, or prioritize me, it was never enough. If he did choose me it would be only temporary soothing, then I would find some other way to test it, fear or hold too tight, because he can't fix what's wounded in me. The healing that's needed is on me.

This is a huge realization for me. I am desperate to be chosen and to be prioritized, but I realize that even if he did come running to “save me” it would never be enough, it never is. This provides me with freedom because I understand that what I long for and cannot get would not help me anyway. I then decide to advocate for myself in a healthy way and ask for a small change in communication as an experiment and it triggers extensive attachment anxiety.

February 7, 2021- D, cont. I really want a drink. I want a fix. I want someone to help me feel better. I already ate so much but want to eat more to soothe myself but I know I'll feel worse in any of those scenarios. Maybe I just sit with it. In compassion. In love. Every time I make a healthy empowered decision I am choosing me. I'll keep doing that. So I sent a text saying I wanted his body and he “loved it” this upset me. Because I'm sensitive and blah blah. So I [texted him a long thoughtful text asking to experiment with waiting to text me back until he could focus on me and that] ‘I genuinely don't expect you to drop everything to be responsive to me is part of what I'm saying.’ And sent at 6:11.

It's 7:17 and no response. I want to text him and say: “maybe I'm wrong, maybe I do need instant responses!” I want to say “really, how long can it take to just send one responsive line?” I want to clarify “you don't have to write a treatise, just don't ignore me” I want to take the whole thing back, worried he feels criticized, worried I've asked too much, worried this is the last straw, I'm so scared. I'm near tears, I feel desperate, crazed, I want to tell him “this is coming from a hurt place, please don't be mad at me” he in fact could be taking it very literally, thoughtfully, and it still hurts me.

I don't know when to ask for change and when to sit in the discomfort of things triggering me bc I'll be uncomfortable either way but also, I need to advocate for myself

or share when I'm upset directly, right? I'm quite sensitive. I require hand holding. I'm anxious and insecure at times. This is who I am. This could be experienced as one of my less attractive qualities. M has unattractive qualities. Everyone does. It's ok that I do. I have to be able to be less than perfect. It's ok that I am these things even as I work on reducing the associated pain. It's ok that I push and need. It's ok. And if it's not ok with him, then I'll just have to live with that too, because even if I'm a pain in the ass, I have a lot to offer too. And if he would end things bc of this then he's not the guy for me. See what I did there? Assuming he will leave because of this? Wtf. Wtf!! I truly think it's possible, even probable that he's debating whether or not he can be with me. I bet he is just watching tv or working or whatever, is he? Why can't I tolerate not being responded to? The why doesn't matter. Abandon the why. Oh Rachel. I love you sweet girl. It's going to be ok...

7:54pm: one slice of cake later, no response. I'm back in high school, maybe younger. I feel sick to my stomach. I'm terrified. I'm in pain. I'm deeply hurt. I feel foolish and regret saying anything. I feel hurt by his silence. I feel played with. I feel angry that he may be putting his shit and reactivity before what I think was clearly a good faith effort to self-advocate after I already shared last night how insecure I've been and to not take me personally. I'm not ok with this. This shows I am not a priority, that he couldn't take a few minutes to respond to me.

8:15: now I'm convinced he's using me for sex. That he's been lying to me. I want to go to sleep. One thing is for sure. I need to be prepared to be rejected if I advocate for myself. I have to understand that anything can happen, any response, bc I can't control how people will respond and that's best bc otherwise I attempt to control and I lose.

9 pm: So he insisted on FaceTiming once I wrote “going to sleep” and “I’m scared.” We did and he was kind and said he was here and not leaving and would do his best and that I can test my stories and share my fear and breakdowns etc. etc. so all the pain and stories I told myself were not at all aligned. As I suspected he was taking me literally and waited to respond until he could really engage but didn’t want to text etc. etc. so my fear cannot rule me. I need to test things. It’s ok for me to be scared. It’s ok to reach out. He’s a good man who cares about me and tries as hard as he can to meet me. Reading this I feel sick. I remember feeling out of control. It was so intense, so visceral. Even though my logical mind believed I was overreacting, and not getting an instant response was unbearable. Was he calling my bluff? Was he taking me very literally and waiting until he could “really pay attention?” It does not matter; it hurt me deeply, and then, when I saw his face and spoke to him, he was wonderful, supportive, and kind.

I do not know how to be secure in relationships. I am learning that I need to learn to accept what I have or I need to be prepared when I ask for a change that I will not like the outcome. The next day, I continue to spiral, my anxiety and desperation increase, and I fall into old patterns.

February 8, 2021: Magick and I are at the secret place. It's 2:40 in the afternoon, about 20°. We did Panthera this morning with NJ. It was 10° and it was crystal lovely. I am sad. I am really churned up...all my wounds feel like they're open and in the midst of it, I'm doing all the things I counsel other people not to do: I am not paying full attention to myself, I am judging my feelings and finding that they are unacceptable, dismissing them because they seem like they lack perspective and [then I focus instead on how] other people have it worse. I continue to go into a mind place trying to figure out “why”

or how I'm feeling, what I'm feeling, as if insight is going to help, I'm not present in my mind.

And here's what's going on, I'm lonely, I spend an enormous amount of time alone, I'm in the middle of a pandemic that's been going on for almost a year now, I lost my best friend, my whole life has changed enormously in the past year, I'm in uncharted waters, I have no idea what I'm doing, and I'm falling back on old patterns and behaviors because they're familiar. I continue to feel like it's my job to care for others and that I should not be receiving or asking for care. I continue to judge my feelings. And dismiss them. Even when I'm being compassionate I'm not fully here. And I'm getting really mad and upset with other people for treating me [similarly] and I'm doing it. I am hurting myself. I am the one doing the hurting. And maybe I just need to directly feel that hurt. And then I can stop beating up on myself and also criticizing and trying to change others. And I genuinely judge how I'm acting, I feel that I'm being very self-involved, I'm not caring for others...

I have this running commentary in my head that's like: "You're so dramatic, you have everything, why are you whining? You're so self-involved and annoying. Nobody's gonna wanna be with you if you continue to be sad like this and whiny and self-involved. You're gonna drive everybody away. And it's just unattractive. You look like a crazy person. You look like you're hysterical. You don't have any reason to feel this way. In fact you're so privileged it borders on disgusting that you are so self-indulgent; you're not getting anything done! You're avoiding things. You shouldn't even be doing therapy with people, you can't even hold a conversation with people where you're not making it all about you." And you know, that's mean. I am very sensitive and I have been through

really shitty things that have fucked me up and wired me into being incredibly insecure. Even though I “know” that I am being abusive to myself, I am still trying to use logic to help soothe my feelings, and it is not working. I am again trying to suppress my emotional experience, even though I had just learned what a destructive force that is in my life. Instead, I try to remind myself to use other tools:

February 8, 2021, cont., And this insecurity cannot be effectively soothed from the outside. It requires my love and care and attention. Also, it’s in my body. I could feel it in my chest and my throat. It’s like what we read about Blue Jay today, this is my truth and even though I get embarrassed after I share, it’s still how I feel. It’s my experience. It isn’t rational but it is a reality of how I feel, this is who I am and how I feel. And fighting it I don’t think it’s helping it. I’m not practicing what I’ve been learning which is letting it flow through me.

M suggested yesterday that I dance and I think that’s a great idea. I have to get it out of my body, my throat and heart are tight. And I keep stuffing food in there. And I don’t want to. Sugar hurts me. I’m trying to stuff down my feelings because I find them unacceptable. I have to accept them, this is who I am. I’m self-involved and insecure And I’m also really loving and present and compassionate and smart and brave and 1 million other things that I admire so let’s just embrace it all. I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know if there’s a right way but I’m committed to trying all the ways I can to meet it and move through it. I am committed to you, Rachel. I love you. You’re the most important person in my life. And I will stop hurting you if it’s the last thing that I ever do.

I am coaching myself about wholeness here. I have socially judged “negative” and “positive” qualities and feelings, but they are my reality. I need to use something other than my mind to

accept, integrate and flow through them:

February 8, 2021, cont., When we first started our walk and I realized how closed minded and judgmental and mean I was being to myself I asked Bear to come help me and Bear put her arms around me and I cried. I asked why my holding wasn't enough, and that's when I discovered that I wasn't truly holding myself, I was half assing it like I was blaming everybody else for doing. But Bear didn't half ass it. Bear is willing to carry me if I need to be carried and hold me if I need to be held and I need to let Bear come in and ask Bear to come in more often when I feel this way. I deserve to be comforted, I deserve to be cherished. I deserve somebody to show up for me. Me.

Acceptance of myself, the calming and re-centering. These interventions would work, the feelings would pass, and I would again be able to feel love, openness, and joy. This centering on yourself [see that "yourself" vs. myself?] is not an exercise, it is a way of engaging directly with the world, ideally all the time. I attempt to work through some of my anxiety through talking to a friend and then I read through my notes:

February 9, 2021- D:

JT: "So, do you think you are going to go through these emotions always with this man?"

R: "On one hand, I hope so, on the other, I hope I can heal my way through it. He triggers me and if I find the courage to share with him, he is kind, present, and loving. So it's not that he's hurting me, it's that I am :/... I still believe I can "fix" things if I just try hard enough. It's just that in the past I thought I needed to fix the other person, so I could be safe, or simply bc I wanted certain things and needed to find a way to get them. Now I see that I need to find a way to heal myself bc no one else can do it. That I need to focus

that “fixing” and strategizing on myself or better, get rid of it altogether so I can just experience things from a secure position.”

So I've been reading the past few days and I'm embarrassed. I feel like I am too much. I am obsessive and emotional and tangential and just riddled with anxiety and insecurity. Only sometimes. But I make up all the stories. And I obsess and assume and I'm needy and spiral into deep irrational fear and I'm embarrassed. I'm embarrassed reading it about myself, and I'm embarrassed that I shared it with M. It's all cocoo. There's got to be some way to navigate this where I'm not hurting myself like this. Where I'm feeling, but I'm not spinning into anxiety and then using that anxiety to gather evidence and then believing that evidence. I mean tapping I guess, calling in my spirit animals. A huge blue jay just visited my feeder and was trying to find a way to get food. I meditate on Blue Jay, who is so bold in her calls, she says: “Speak your truth with confidence.” Right, but then I do all of the interventions I mapped out in my “self-soothing” section, and I think it works...

February 10, 2021: I started this around 8:30 AM 2/3 of the way up Panthera. It's 10° out, we had a storm yesterday with about 8 inches of snow...after my hike yesterday and when M came over I was happy, I was centered and present... The point of this entry is that going through the process of being centered and grounded and present and remembering that I am flexible and strong and resilient greatly affected how I interacted, which then affected the response I received. I was centered on myself. I took pleasure and focused on myself. When M gave me pleasure, and even practical things, like shoveling, I let him, and I was grateful for it. All that churned up-ness, it was gone. And when I was with him I wondered how I could be insecure. It's obvious that he loves me. And it's obvious that I

love me. And it's also clear that talking about things helps. Whether it's with the woods or a supervisor or your joy friend.

And I am very interested to see if there's a pattern around my spiral where I feel calm and good and centered and then I creep into some doubts and then I go to insecurity and then I have a full-fledged meltdown and then I go back to center. And maybe I can make that loop shorter. Or maybe during the meltdown I could just be feeling deep emotion without being mean to myself. Maybe that's my cycle, but I just need to feel deeply at times and maybe I need to let myself feel more often and maybe then I won't spiral down. More experiments to come.

Perhaps this experience being centered on myself with M is not intimacy, but whatever it is when I am not in psychic pain, it feels amazing. I assume it is because of my trauma and socialization, that this type of "intimacy" is so challenging to maintain. My emotions are a carnival ride, and while I do not review my actions to identify areas of shame, I continue to overanalyze, catastrophize, look for problems, and worry. There is indeed a pattern, and it does look a bit like I described, I am amazed that in that snippet it seemed like it had never occurred to me before.

That same day, I document more details in my dating notes:

February 10, 2021- D, Yesterday M came over and we had absolutely amazing sex in the afternoon and shoveled snow and ate yummy food and had a drink and had more amazing, amazing sex ate more yummy food I read my poem to him he was present. We were both in such thorough joy with each other. We got into bed early, he wanted to read. We started talking about who knows what and I brought up the polyamory thing. He actually was open & OK with me looking for another female partner, but he was very clear that he was not comfortable with a man. And so I tried to get more information

about it and he got extremely upset and was adamant that being with another man was not OK with him. I was saying that I thought gender was fluid that this wasn't about sex it was about connection and he wasn't having any of it.

He was obviously triggered and I tried to help soothe him but he was deep in a loop and confused and trying to make sense of this joy and comfort turning to this upset. In fact he said "this is too much I need some space" and he got up and went to the other room. And I didn't say anything to pursue him. I sat in it. I wasn't even that scared. And I invited him back after about five minutes gently and eventually he did come back. And I said "look, I love you, and I've got a lot of love for you and it's challenging for me because you're not available for love." And he said "what makes you think that I'm not available for love?" I said. "It's hard to be in this one-sided, it's hard to love you alone." And he said "but I do love you Rachel! I told you already. I don't know what else I have to do to prove it." I don't think I responded to that directly. I think maybe I just said that if he wants to use the love language idea... I try to remember that his love language is acts of service and that I know through how he acts that he loves me, I assume through how he acts that he loves me because he's very loving in his actions. But my love language is more in words also and I need reassurance and I get insecure and I need to hear the words. That I've misinterpreted people's actions before and so I need a lot of clarity. Well, he calmed down, he wasn't angry anymore And I asked him if he was still angry and he said no, that what we were just talking about was soothing for him but that he's tired and can't talk about it anymore and just needed to lay down and so I held him and we went to sleep very close.

I continue to push the need for ENM; wanting to find someone that will be more emotionally

available, who will provide me constant reassurance and verbal affirmation. M is supportive, but only if it is a woman. I push him, and he becomes triggered again and again. I tell him I believe it will help with my anxiety, and he supports me.

February 10, 2021- D cont. ... And I woke up this morning at 5 AM and was very turned on. And he suggested that I masturbate which I did, which turned him on, and I should note that that was why the afternoon sex was so fucking amazing also it's because I used the toy first and it was very hot. I should also note that I was very specific about focusing on what things felt like and not my mind. I kept going back to what things felt like and I didn't even allow any more than just a second thought to things. I also blocked the view of myself in the mirror and just looked at him and that was also helpful to not get caught up in the body shame.

Well sex this morning was amazing. And I was a little sobby afterwards and he asked me what was wrong and I said 'nothing is wrong it's just joy and love' and that's what it was, because even though if for a second I thought 'holy shit I hope this man never leaves me because this is actually the best sex of my life and I love him' I put that aside to be in the moment and check in with what I felt and I felt joy and love and I said it. It felt good, I feel good. And I feel secure and happy, and I also feel like maybe I'll look for a woman to be with. And that's OK

In hindsight I can see I bring ENM up every time I feel a deep shared connection with M. I argue that I do this because I feel grounded when we are close, but I am suspicious that perhaps it is not that at all. Perhaps I become insecure when I feel secure. I wonder if this is the avoidant attachment experience:

... I just had a passing thought, do I wait until he's feeling joyful and open to bring up things that upset him? That would kind of make sense, that I do that with the hope that he's not feeling triggered or it seems like a good time to bring something up, but it seems like because he does get triggered and then he gets so confused like "I was feeling so good I thought we were in the same place." I guess I need to talk to him a little bit about that, about my process, and see if there's a better time to bring things up that would feel less confusing to him. At the same time, when I feel safest, when I feel most comfortable and joyful is when I feel more likely to share deeper thoughts, but it's the deeper thoughts that often trigger him, even when they're coming from a place of curiosity. Or exploration. And so we've got to figure out a way to balance that. Because in order for me to be grounded I have to feel safe. So maybe it's not about timing, maybe it's about setting the stage in advance and asking about it and maybe doing some Imago (Hendrix, 1990)?

In the past, things would have been different, I think. I would have "put myself in his shoes" and then assumed it would be hurtful to open yourself up to joy and love only to be met with your lover suggesting they want to see other people. However, I was making conscious efforts to not put myself in his shoes, or at least I assumed that despite what he said or did, he did not actually love me. It did not occur to me that it may be hurtful to continue to push him away after he finally lets himself feel close to me. I just know that he would share that he was confused and would say things like, "I thought we were in the same place" or "I was feeling such joy and now I feel hurt." I still do not know exactly what was going on for him, but I know if it was me, I would be devastated. However, it is his responsibility to share that with me, right? Or was I not listening? Either way, I continue to engage and project onto M. He is so different from me, so

practical, I struggle to make sense of his behavior and reconcile it with my fantasy of him.

February 14, 2021: Magick and I are in the woods at 7:30 am, we're near the waterfall at Panthera. It's about 20°. Dream intervention (from Fritz Perls, share your dream and after every line or two, say "this is my experience") Dream last night: we're out somewhere in a rural area and we come upon a car. In it there's three screaming children and a frenzy of wasps or bees. The windows are closed and the children are screaming and screaming. They've got some weird helmets or masks on and you can see that they're getting stung and that it's horror. This is my experience. Soon it becomes apparent that this is animatronic. Some mad scientist has put together this installation. It's terrifying, this is my experience. My sister and I along with this mad scientist go into his warehouse where he's creating another one of these installations. This is my experience. It's all being put together by robotics. And as things are being put together, you can see that the robotics are clumsy. The robotics are spilling toxic materials and knocking things over. And the mad scientist doesn't seem to care about any of this. This is my experience. Soon the mad scientist walks away and my sister and I watch this horror being re-created. We see that a whole is dug in the ground and that smoke and other materials are being gathered to whip the bees up into a frenzy. This is my experience. My sister says: "that's it I've had enough!" And she decides she's going to burn the whole place down. This is my experience. She goes to the back of the warehouse and finds some way to create a huge explosion. I'm in the front and when she's done she comes running towards me and she's like "run run!" So we're running and I'm not going fast enough. She's pushing me and we're running so fast when we get up we fly through the doors outside of the warehouse and I'm terrified that we're gonna be too late and that we're going to be taken in by the

explosion. This is my experience. We make it out of the blast zone. And we come upon the mad scientist in a car with another little boy. I'm terrified realizing that my sister and I do not have a coordinated story. And my sister, she's not with me. He takes us back, me and the boy, to the warehouse and the place is burned down and I try to act surprised. This is my experience. And I ask innocently "is the whole back of the building burned down too?" And the mad scientist looks at me as if he knows that I'm lying, as if he knows that I know what has happened. He's just waiting for me to mess up. This is my experience. Despite feigning ignorance, the mad scientist mirrors me and pretends to believe me, he doesn't call me out. He's very sad that all of his work has seemingly been destroyed. He drives us to another location. I can tell it's smaller than the first but it is more secure. There's a window like two stories up and next to it is an air conditioner... He and the boy are in the other part of this building and I climb the hay even though it's very tricky. I test out the air conditioner because I'm thinking I'm gonna be stuck here and this might be the only way I can survive. I also look at the window which is made out of window panes. There's no way I can escape this. This is my experience. I turn the air conditioner on quickly because I don't want to alarm him or show him that I'm trying to figure out an escape route. And I remember heat rises and maybe this will keep me cool because we're sort of in a desert. This is my experience. I get worried that I've changed the a/c settings and then he'll know and I'll be caught and something terrible will happen. This is my experience. I turn off the air conditioner and try to climb back down. I almost fall but I make it. This is my experience. I'm scared. But I still think I can escape. This is my experience. I believe that's the end of the dream.

Using this technique, I feel like I am identifying the struggle I have trying to outsmart and escape from my “mad scientist” self; the one creating these terrifying experiment experiences, and the one that continues to torture my inner children. This is how I analyzed it: “Re dream: mad scientist is me triggering and hurting myself, sadistically for no reason again and again. Me, fearing I cannot escape. My escape attempts are thwarted. The scientist is too mad, too smart. Bees = being. Scientist says that the idea of Being is actually horror and all lies; but I do not believe it, do I? I will escape.”

On February 11, 2021 I got my first vaccine shot and shingles on the same day. Over the next few weeks I was in so much pain. I ignored a UTI that turned into a kidney infection. I am in agony for a full month.

February 14, 2021: In other news. I got the vaccine on Thursday and also had a rash that morning and it turns out that rash is shingles. It's very painful and gross too. I'm embarrassed about it even though I shouldn't be. I was very nervous to see M yesterday but he was fine of course. I was concerned about being vulnerable in front of him and in pain and that he'd let me down. But I prepared myself for him to be a little spacey ... but I know he cares about me so it doesn't matter, he doesn't have to be my nurse maid. In fact I'm glad he isn't. We went out for a drink with NJ and came back home and had really awesome sex. Very dirty which I like, as you know. And afterwards I just felt so close to him and I told him that I loved him and he was all remembering sweet things afterwards and said I love you too. It is the most natural exchange of I love yous we've ever had so it feels really nice. We then had a nice night together and we slept really close even though I'm in a lot of pain.

He also brought a ton of Valentine's Day treats over, like boxes of chocolate and cookies and a cake ... I noticed in our two days apart that I wasn't pining for M the way that I usually do. Maybe it was just the pain and wanting to just hide. But I almost didn't want to see him and considered canceling. I think also he seemed ambivalent. But that was just because he was struggling to balance everyone's expectations. I did call him out on it and... he admitted that he often doesn't actually share how he really feels about things because he's trying to make sure that I am OK. I told him that is also what I was doing and ... he said "Yep that's what I do." So I will work on that. ... I feel like I'm progressing on accepting M for who he is. I like his oafish manliness in a lot of ways. Maybe not while it's happening. But I really want him to be confident. So it is a balance to try to get some things I might need from him and also accept who he is.

M and I are both withholding what we want or need to try to care for the other person, and it is backfiring. I continue to try to not change M, despite the anxiety. I then move onto ENM again and ponder how I am falling back on old patterns related to value, worth, creating insecurity in other, and being wanted:

February 14, 2021-D cont.: Speaking of which, I did go back online to try to find a female partner. At least to just date. I've never had so little response...Women are different obviously ... [this person I had dated briefly before M] suggested that I go do some app called Open. I gotta check that out. He tried flirting with me, and I didn't flirt back. In fact I was a bit coy at the beginning and then I was very clear that I was not looking for another male partner. And he switched very quickly so that was good even though it kind of bums me out a little bit because I really like flirting. And I really like when people flirt with me, it makes me feel good. But I'm respecting M's boundaries

here, I would want him to do the same with me. And maybe over time he'll open up about it, but in the meantime no need to push it.

I do think in a way I'm looking for male attention. It's not just women and emotional connection. I miss being flirted with and I guess there's just something about men wanting me, it kinda of goes with all the other shit right? I wonder if part of it is some old drive to equalize things with M, and trying to bring about some insecurity in him so that he fights for me or so he wants me more. For me to be unavailable or unobtainable or just the old shit that if I'm wanted by other people that means that I am valuable and so he should work harder.

I'm so brainwashed. I still believe all that even as I'm saying it and unpacking it. I'm thinking 'yeah, If I had a bunch of dudes pursuing me he would get possessive and claim me.' And that's what feels good. I think that's why the dirty sex is so good. Wanting to be claimed. Fought for. What I know is that M doesn't like games, if I told him straight up 'I want you to claim me more' he would totally do it. In fact, maybe I'll share this with him directly without all the processing and see if he'll do more of that without feeling like he's being judged. We're nearing the top of Panthera and it's snowing but ever so lightly. It's so beautiful, enough of these games. I love you.

I try to process how to communicate my insecurity and sexual needs with M that will seem encouraging. In the past I did it by being critical and I suppose indirect, and that brought poor results. I continue to grapple with figuring out how to share what I want authentically and directly from a place of strength.

A few days later, I wrote the following poem in the early morning in M's bed, feeling so much love and confusion I feel I may burst into a room of falling stars. In the midst of those feelings, I am convinced that we cannot ever understand each other and that we are too different:

February 17, 2021- D

Sign and Date at the X

2 snuck up to 3 and now we're 4

Your thighs between mine not a time to make sense of

Huddled into your shoulder, shivery bunny seeking warmth I sob while seeking other release

Wanting to insist you see my fluff and fangs

pushing past pain that brings your softest sympathy

wanting to be easy but difficult

so you will work for me without discovering I am, again, "too much" and never enough

A story is truth to someone willing to believe

trying to find the formula when simple inquiry would do, wouldn't you?

Is this simplicity? Complacency? Confinement? Pandemic? Dystopian flashback flash forward 2 months, 3... will your rising in the night still foster fluttery pride?

Will your bigness still delight? Intimidate? Trigger down deep pulsing heat seeking one thing again again again?

4 longs to be 7 so we can gather and go

4 longs to be last 8 so we can join again, if only in frenzied fucks with daddy screens hoping, wishing, missing once again but so. very. close.

Rain is river is cloud is air is seed is tree is dirt is bee is moon is Owl is now is me and so, you see

It's not your intention, it's my feelings. It's not my feelings, it's my fears. It's not my fears, it is my longing. It's not my longing, it's my needs. It's not my needs, it is my aching. It's not my aching, it's my dis-ease. It's not my dis-ease, it is my love seeking sunlight in moon, seeking Bear huffs on neck, seeking vines twisting over wrists holding down time with urgency slipping, slipping away

To be claimed again or just once

To be claimed again or just once. Just once to be chosen and held. Just once to be treasured, irreplaceable. Just once to belong. To be essential, part of something with legs and longing.

To be someone's favored child, someone's destiny.

To be someone.

I search for this in leaden arms burdened with sleep.

I search for this in mundane words and daily deeds.

I search for this in slightest movement in darkest night, when eye color means nothing next to starlight.

When the shape of your mouth calls to me in shadow time.

Tongue on the prow.

Fingers searching, grasping, owning.

If it's my pussy you want you can have it.
 If it's my thighs, folded in child's pose, whole self bracing for you, you can have that too.
 But then I'll have you
 under man-speak
 miles past father-tongue
 deep in heart-folds
 bloodline beating my name
 This is the bargain I seek
 but no. It will not be.
 It cannot be.
 I am too slippery, you see.
 I am too much flash and not enough fur or feathers.
 A mermaid to your Wolf-Bear, our parts just don't align.
 But I will visit you on land, my lovely beast.
 I will split my tail to shapely legs to wrap below around and through, I'll open for you, and let you drink and in return—
 I'll claim your highest leaves and thickest roots, I'll balance on your limbs, talons sharp and beak ready for the strike.
 A must be, I'll use you for a landing site, a lookout, a hunting lodge, a moment's rest.
 And in the tallest morning,
 the lushest shelter,
 I'll settle amongst your branches,
 a million fragile buds,
 reaching, aching for the light.

I want so much for M to see me, to choose me, but I am brave only in words; in actions, I am mute and lost. The following day, I continue to struggle with closeness, acceptance, and staying conscious. My anger and defenses come up as I try to figure out how to advocate for my needs:

February 18, 2021- D, it's been a rough couple days in relationship land... One thing is for sure, I cannot silence myself and it won't be acceptable for long for me to be with somebody who [list of things that M is doing that I also do and hate that I do] It's so hard to reconcile this M with sleepy M who is so kind and attentive and sweet. I don't want to listen to him [do another list of things that I do] And I'm in this conundrum where if I say something about it, he gets defensive so then what's my option? Accept it or leave. But then I won't get all of the rest of M that I like so much. [Rant on how I am not seen by

M] He's very [something I am] And he needs [something that I need] and you know I do too, but...I'm not getting it from him.

So I don't know what the fuck to do. Because I really love parts of him and I so enjoy him, but I'm not getting what I need. And so I'm gonna try some more, to advocate for myself in the moment. And I guess limit my engagement with him otherwise. And see if that's enough for me. ...

It doesn't occur to me, of course, to just give myself what I think I need or want from him. Instead, I focus on finding all the ways he disappoints me by not showing up in ways that I am not showing up and by not giving me what I am not giving myself. Then I consider ways to minimize his affect on me and when that doesn't work, I turn to anger:

February 18, 2021- D cont., I mean I could just use him as a sex toy I guess? That makes me cry. I'm crying now. Because I don't want that. And I know part of this is influenced by Covid and part is influenced by the agony I'm in. And part of this is influenced by all the attachment shit he brings up. ...And I'm as usual not always doing a great job not sounding critical. But I'm working at it. And he's not. And that's fucking bullshit.

So I gave him Imago (Hendrix, 1990) and he needs to fucking work on imago if we're going to get anywhere. And then I just need to decide if it's enough. Because right now I'm also silencing myself because I don't want him to get mad at me. I don't wanna fight with him. I don't want him to reject me or think I'm too much. I have to remember I'm not always like this, I don't always need these things but right now when I'm in pain and I'm suffering and struggling I do need them. And if he's gonna be my boyfriend, he needs to learn how to provide it, even if it's out of his comfort zone.... I think I need to process a bit out loud what else might be going on here because it seems very

straightforward that I'm in pain and suffering and struggling and I need extra attention. ... sometimes it's gonna happen that I need attention outside of his boundaries and if I ask for it I really need it ... I have to be prioritized like that sometimes, I don't need it all the time. I need it sometimes and I'm asking for it when I need it because if I don't, it's not gonna be good for anyone.

I also told him that I didn't want him to be perfect, I just wanted to be able to express upset when despite his best efforts I still feel feelings, because my feelings are about me and there has to be space for me! This isn't about how good he is or how bad he is, it's about how I am, who I am and how I feel. My feelings are not his responsibility. My ask is that I can have feelings around him and that there can be space for them. And that we can look at them and engage with them without problem-solving. Because my feelings are not a problem to be solved, and they're not about whether he's good or bad, they're about me! Me! Me! I am here too. I'm not doing him any favors by allowing it to continue where the focus is fully on him all the time.

I am clearly frustrated and angry. M is not super in touch with his feelings; he is delightful, smart, fun, and naturally used to being the center of attention. The problem is, so am I, and I continue to struggle to expand around him; because he does so many of the things I do: he entertains; he tries to empathize when he hears a story, and in doing so, he makes it about him. He is self-centered with me, because much of the rest of his time he is taking care of others. Though he is super caring and loving, unless I really push for him to be present, he is not emotionally engaged. He also has a very stressful 24 hour a day job, is a full time dad to a teenager, and has an emotionally labile girlfriend: me. Even knowing all of this, it is hard for me to navigate a world where I am not the center of attention and the leader in my relationship.

However, I did not want to be the leader anymore, and I got what I asked for. I just needed to figure out how to show up in the new paradigm.

February 18, 2021- D, cont. It seemed our conversation sunk in and M took care of things for me today and was trying to be present this afternoon. He was all “I want to connect with you” and took me to bed this afternoon and I freaked the fuck out, actually that’s critical hyperbole, I shared my confusion and current fear, emotional whiplash and confusion. He did not get defensive or try to fix things but he was clearly confused. I struggled with wanting to “act normal” or do something to please him, but said ‘I don’t know what I want, so I can’t sacrifice myself or put myself in what feels like danger given how terrified and ungrounded I am.’

Feeling it could help clarify my emotional state, I read him my poem [Sign and Date at the X] and after saying “that’s beautiful” he tried to figure out where the instructions I eluded to were ... I said “can you combine sensitive caring M with sexy M?” Bc you know, I think that’s what I need. He said he’d try. He then got a work call and left bed. That was good bc I then gathered myself. I wrote the following and played some guitar. I do feel better, I’m just not sure for how long. But it is good to know what to expect when or if I share this level of emotion. Though in his defense, the last time I did and we FaceTimed he was perfect, so who knows.

Parts (Poem) 2/18/21

Part of me says fuck you

Part says closet significantly under jelly going salad ballet lying from belly precipice crowding nomadic grasslands fed asunder.

Part of me says, good for you! Taking a risk! Showing yourself! If he cannot meet or see this part of you, now you know.

Part of me says what’s wrong with you? It’s right fucking there in front of your stupid fucking face.

Part of me says please hold me, show me, love me, save me.

Part of me says I don’t even care anyway.

Part of me says, distract yourself, find something else to do.
 Part of me says can't you be normal just this once?
 Part of me says, fake it! You're going to regret showing your belly when you're
 eviscerated and left for dead.
 Part of me says fucking will fix this right up, it always does.
 Part of me says not this time, you're in too much pain and you don't even know
 what you want or need so don't sacrifice yourself or do anything rash.
 Part of me says, grow up, toughen up, buck up, get over it
 Part of me says, accept you are an alien in this world and no one can understand
 your language. That part also says Owl, Bear, Tree, Wolf, Wind, River, Eagle, Crow
 Part of me says, come home to me, dear one, I will love and care for you in
 exactly the way you need.
 Part of me says take care of his ego so he doesn't run away, then follows that up
 with fuck that, if he runs, good riddance.
 Part says run, run now, run run run
 Part says stay and share, you're brave and worth it and no one can read your mind
 Part says don't talk Proust with your dog and expect a coherent response
 Part says, you don't even know who Proust is without googling him so you may
 look foolish trying to be smart
 Part says, you get my point, don't be an asshole
 Part says I love you, sweetest one, come to me and me and Bear will soothe you
 and make you all better.
 Part says, yes, do that, I love your complexity, your creativity, your sensitivity,
 your light, I love you in all your ways, I am you and I am your home. If people want to
 visit, invite them in. If they don't, hug them goodbye and then settle in by the fire, it will
 be my pleasure to hold, listen to, and experience you.
 Part says, tell him you feel all better now that you said it all out loud and played
 some guitar, because it's true!
 And part says, you know, sometimes you're a liar.
 *incidentally, I was wrong about Proust, thinking him a philosopher when he is
 actually an author

I have days and weeks where I allow myself to feel loved, secure, and held; and then I run, run,
 run away. I also have all those feelings in the Parts poem in one day, or even in the span of 10
 minutes: holding multiple realities indeed! How can I center my experience on myself if I am
 made up of dozens of contradictory parts? Or make sense of it all? Is it even possible? Is it even
 necessary?

In hindsight, I can also imagine from M's perspective how confusing it must have been
 for him when I would want and ask for closeness and reassurance and then back away physically,

emotionally, or through bringing up ENM once he came closer. If he was acting inconsistently like me, I would not, nor could I, have tolerated it. He seemed to be secure about it, but he also would share how “confounded” he was each time things would be great between us. Inevitably that would lead to me sobbing and then withdrawing, as illustrated in the next poem:

Now (poem) Feb 19, 2021 4:51pm

Once I believed believing was a thing, that love would be simple, straight
 These crooked days I bow and weave, I dribble and heave, I rush and trickle one
 seed at a time, a tear here, a racing raindrop there desperate to stay and leave
 Last week I believed I loved you
 Today, I imagine my whole self must alone
 Days ago I believed you belonged inside of me, now I cannot recognize your
 breath
 you are a fog, the oddest of strangers, who are you again?
 Missing your taste or is it the heights I reached last week, pure and rich before the
 fall
 Knowing if I keep down this road I could drive too far too fast
 Every corner is blind and my rush keeps things off kilter, stalling tragedy
 When I crash I bash hard and no arms to catch me I tumble tumble down
 In a well of danky dark I watch the light whither from moon-glow to cave-night
 I left my wings above and now below I roll in filth and longing
 I play with broken leaves and pebbles, I use the earth to write the story of us on
 stone worn thin with history, nothing sticks
 I have no more stories to tell unless backwards or shuffled into hologram, keys
 bent or lost, only locks remain
 Every glass is a mirror cracked or distorted, my reflection a grotesque reverie
 I cannot see when I'm inside of you, I cannot see
 I slither through the grass only to find more grass and more grass
 I cannot climb time, I cannot have mine, I cannot pursue why or Wolf comes in to
 scold me
 I cannot mix with Owl, she's hungry and has no use of me
 Even as Mouse I'm sour, rotten-rodent, alive but barely so
 I have been branded by your fingers and this infection, lurking in my spine until
 the time was right to strike
 Pain is no enemy or friend, pain shows up when he wants to, takes a shit on your
 table, and tries to pass it off as dessert, pain doesn't let you leave until you've eaten every
 last bite
 I find the sun and curl up even just to trip the unsuspecting
 I am a wet tissue, a flaccid stalk of celery, ocean in the desert

Once I thought I was somebody, I thought I was somebody, I lied
 I try to claim me but my ticket has gone missing
 Eating pretzels does nothing for my chin or my mood
 Food will not help, it didn't last time, it won't this time yet still I chew and
 swallow.
 I cannot drink through this confusion without creating toxic fumes, a beaker in
 chemistry smoky and strange
 Sobbing has lost its allure yet still minces about, lipstick smeared and lurid.
 Shame has taken hold and is ashamed of herself once more. Shame is shaming
 Shame and blaming Shame for all the blame and shame and this goes on and on
 I try on Eagle but she only glares then looks away
 I am insignificant in ways that dwarf Shame's shenanigans
 I want to vomit until there's nothing left but cracker throat and congestion
 I want to hit my head against a wall until I bleed then regret that in the morning
 Is this lost? No couldn't be.
 I dream of tree but feel chest weight, a heavy paw with fangs bared and your hot
 breath on my face
 Go ahead and eat me, I've nowhere else to be
 Snow is relentless without gathering, the world has been shaken and the flakes
 swirl and settle only to be shaken again
 I'm stuck in stuckness and want to shout and dance and pull my hair out but it's
 too much effort to even finger type this poem
 Perhaps I've had enough to drink that I can expel it and feel some relief
 I consume more and more trying to fill the well so I can crawl out but we both
 know there's a hole in the bottom.
 Can you help me fill my time? Did I ever even know you? Are you real? Am I?
 I'm lost. So lost. I'm demented. Spoiled. It's all been a ruse.
 Love was hope dressed up for a date that never showed.
 I sit alone, trying not to look desperate but we know I am
 I sit alone trying to pretend I wanted it like this, I didn't, did I?
 I can't evolve beyond the line I've drawn even when it would be one step then the
 next—I'm too stubborn, too proud.
 I will not be used unless I allow it but I've done too much of that and now I'm
 trapped
 I leaped and found a fishbowl instead of the sea.
 I'm trapped.
 Let me out let me out let me out why don't you hold me can you even see me do
 you even care aren't you even curious about me don't I inspire you am I invisible how
 can I please you fuck off hold me. None of this is true.
 I swim in circles, viscously whipping my tail only to find I'm back where I started
 and I'm an ouroboros, my throat constricted, I still will not let go.

Eternity it is for me but alone with only moments of glory I've likely concocted
so easy to dismiss.

I cannot be salvaged or repaired.

I cannot meet you here or there.

My now is then and now I only have this heaviness, this desire to expel.

This desperate urge to run run run over a cliff and into the darkest of ocean only
to find I'm just a snowflake, caught in your hair, and soon to disappear forever.

At this stage, I feel I have lost myself. I have withdrawn into a dark place and feel that even the animals have abandoned me. The only joy I have is hiking with Magick and sex with M; otherwise, the world closes in around me. The themes of all my insecurities are mapped out in that poem. Am I a liar? What is truth? What is fantasy? Do you even care about me? Anxious, avoidant, anxious, avoidant.

I continue to project and get confused on what I can accept about M and what I should try to explore with him. I push him to share his emotional experience with me. We work through some of his defenses, I drink a lot and forget things that happen, he explains how certain he feels about me and about "us," I insist I need more verbal reassurance, not just his actions. I am scared to death that if I agree to his request that I interpret his actions, I will again create a fantasy and then be taken by surprise when that fantasy is exposed. I also do not want to agree to the "feminine" role of doing all the emotional work figuring out what he feels; however, if he cannot do it for himself... what to do about the double bind?

I somehow manage to care for myself and my dog, my clients, and my home. I still see M three times a week if not more. I do not sabotage myself or the relationship. Instead, I show up open with no obvious defenses. I am convinced that our relationship will end, but I do nothing to try to hold it too tight. I let it breathe. I let myself breathe. I still climb the mountain every day. I am fevered and in agony. My friends help me. M helps me, but he does not save me. I only asked to be saved once when the fever was so high I was delirious and thought I would die in my sleep.

He cannot do it because of his other responsibilities. I accept this and let it go.

February 19, 2021- D cont. Good session with FJ. At the end I reminded myself that he provides so much holding and grounding and I don't want to change him. I also don't [want to just focus on him]. The thing is that I need to show up with more of myself... And so I just need to take up more space with my poetic self. And if I show up with that he will engage, I think.

I truly believe my pep talks. I believe they will stick.

February 19, 2021- D cont., I can't expect him to invite me into my own space. He shows up with what he has to offer and I need to show up with what I have to offer. The rest of this is my work.

This is what I mean about personal responsibility; seeing what is and making decisions about how I want to engage in relationship. I do not want to set M up to be fantasy M and then be disappointed in him every time he does not live up to my fantasy. I also do not want to reject parts of him, that are reflective of parts of me, that I refuse to accept. However, at the same time, I do not want to keep myself silent and bend to his will or to his defenses.

I convince myself I do not even *want* reassurance from M. That would be *bad* for me, and plus, I would not believe him anyway. Soon I start to waver and wonder if I need to end things. I feel weak, but I persevere because the highs are so high. The reality, I remind myself, is that he is human and imperfect and his imperfections push me to see more in myself, to take responsibility for my wants and needs, and to understand separateness and decide on compromise. Can I tolerate that he is an individual and I am one too?

A Turning Point? Or Just Another Lap?

He tries so hard to provide what I ask for [his attention, kind words, checking in with me

when we are apart], and each time he does I accept it and appreciate it. Still, he is not enough, and feeling like he is not enough is one of his core wounds. Given this, I would constantly try to reassure him that he was *more* than enough, and when I reassure him, I am telling the truth, because in those moments he actually *is* more than enough for me. But my anxiety always reaches a different conclusion; because in other ways, Anxiety argued, either I was *too much* or he just wasn't enough *for me*. After days of spiraling I have a moment of clarity. I stop seeing him as a problem and really look at myself, at what I can control:

February 20, 2021- D I think I finally figured out what's going on with me. I was focusing so much on how M was acting and how I didn't like it, and what I wasn't focusing on is how I'm acting and how I don't like it. I'm not being myself. I've stopped pushing against things, I've stopped asserting myself in the way that is representative of who I am, I've stopped being creative, I've stopped asking deep questions, I've stopped calling out when something doesn't sit right with me. I used to say all the time "I don't want to hear your day-to-day details," and then I just started listening to them.

I asked myself today, "what makes you unique? Makes you different from so many others?" And it's not book learning, and it's not knowledge of wine, and it's not how efficient or effective you are or how much people love you. Why is it that people love you? Why do people choose you to be their friend? It's not the "why" that's important, but rather the qualities that are important. And the ways that I've been showing up are my inferior functions. I've stopped being sassy, I've stopped being playful... I've stopped pushing for deeper and I stopped being interesting. ...

It's very obvious to me that despite my best efforts and "staying awake" I've over-corrected. Over-adapted. That's what I mean. And then the things that actually make

me unique I started to downplay or judge. Because they're different. I'm challenging.

ReH [friend] called it a sharp love stick! Hilarious. But I push and prod, that's who I am, and I stopped doing that. And so, I'd like to do that again because I like that that's who I am. So I'm going to show up today. And I'm not going to get drawn into the M show.

There can't be a Rachel show if Rachel doesn't show up. And there can't be a Rachel and M show if we both don't show up and work together.

Is this a new realization or another repeat? I think the answer is yes (as in both). I want to actively Be, as myself, centered on myself, but there is another struggle here. I want to be authentic, but authentic me is never satisfied. I am an inspirer; someone that pushes people to dig deeper and explore their inner workings. However, M is not interested in engaging in such explorations, at least not to the extent that I am, and I do not want to change him. Are we just not right for each other? How could that be when we have so much joy together?

I put the idea of showing up as myself into practice or try to. I also insist, again, that I need to try to date other people, for emotional and creative connection, not sexual connection, and he accepts this. I am not okay with him dating other people, and luckily he does not want to; or at least does not have the time or space for it. The next day I share the conclusions I came to above, and I also advocate for myself sexually in a direct way that feels really good.

February 21, 2021 Madge and I are at Panthera. M came over yesterday and we talked in the afternoon. He apologized for his reaction the prior night and then I brought up all the things that I've been thinking about. It was a difficult conversation. He got very defensive and angry. But we worked our way through it and afterwards we both felt a lot closer.

[There's a raven overhead and Magick is looking up at her. And so am I.]

Anyway, I stood up for myself. I took responsibility for my part. I can't focus it all

on him and I said I was showing up more and that he might not like who the person is but that's who I am and I'm gonna do it. So his heart is in the right place. It's just insecure, just like me, I get it. I'm excited to continue that with him. I felt really close to him, like the last day hadn't even happened. Like all my feelings were resolved just from talking about them. When we came home... it was just pure bliss. It's just joy together again. And I was saying in reaction to him expressing his joy... how talking helps... and I don't want to change his masculinity or talk about feelings all the time, but if I'm insecure I need reassurance, I do it for myself but I need it from him sometimes too, it's not a big ask. After I finally share my truth, relationally things improve radically. The next couple of days my physical pain from shingles and the kidney infection become unbearable; meanwhile, my emotional pain lifts, except for a fall back into self-objectification:

February 22, 2021, I've been eating too much. And I've gained weight. This morning getting in the car after our hike I again noticed how old I look. How my jawline is dropping, how I have this little double chin when I look to the side. It makes me feel sick. And then I feel bad that I'm judging myself on my looks again. And then I think well, I need to get things done so that I can love myself for what I'm doing vs. how I look. See what I did there?

I'm turning 48 in a few weeks. This year I've aged several years in one. I think a lot of us have. Also I always look like shit in the winter. But mostly, I've been eating really poorly, and obviously drinking too much. So I'm 143.8 pounds this morning up .8 from yesterday. Mostly I'm comfortable at 139-140. It used to be 142 but that's when I was younger. It's just that I have this little belly now and when I sit down there are these little rolls and there's a little pudgy over my jean line, I don't like it. I'm really not

concerned about what other people think right now but that's because nobody sees me. I don't think M will judge me. But I'm judging me.

I was just wondering if I [felt compelled] to judge myself to find the motivation to starve myself. I want to edit that and say I'm not trying to starve myself but that's my plan. Just don't eat during the day. And then cut out all the sweets at night. I'll eat an apple and salads. It worked when I was falling in love didn't it? It's sustainable too because who cares about food except when you're lonely. Or trying to stifle yourself. So as long as I don't eat any carbs during the day I should be fine. All my potatoes have shoots anyway.

Aligned with self-objectification, body monitoring and ruminating about how I will lose weight seems totally normal to me. It is a running commentary in my mind every day and has been since I was old enough to realize that what I looked like was my most defining quality; so, like 12?

Anyway, in the rest of my world, despite the physical agony I am in, I am feeling somewhat grounded and steady. I see A for a hike and we establish that we are again able to be friends and share our lives with each other. That is a huge relief. I also connect with a woman online and start a flirtation with TG. It feels good because she is fun and witty, and she is directly showing interest in me, in my poetry, in my emotional experience. I imagine having those needs met helps me maintain openness and connection with M:

February 24th 2021- D, It's night time and I've been smoking pot all day because of the agony I'm in. This is the stuff that M went out to pick up for me last night. All day long in the woods and sitting here I've been thinking about how good this man is. And all of my anxieties that have come out, today looking back, instead of seeing them as evidence on why I should distance myself, I feel silly about them. Like somehow I have finally

seen him. I'm getting a little choked up saying this. I am baked. Maybe it's just that he really took such good care of me yesterday and this morning. Maybe it's that I could tell that it wasn't just about sex. That he deeply cared about me...

I don't know how to explain it but it is like this defensiveness, this fear response, this—not necessarily criticism—but focus on assumptions and concerns and worries, it's like it all lifted. Part of it was recognizing how in touch he's been in different ways since we spoke. I hope we maintain it. I also hope I'll be able to stay in it and remember that he's a good man and I'm probably projecting a bunch of shit onto him that's really not him. But in my defense, his behavior has changed since we spoke...

I'm feeling a different love for him tonight. Maybe it's appreciation plus added trust. I think I had convinced myself he could only focus on himself... He's different. Maybe it's bc he called me his bunny for a couple days. Maybe it's because I jokingly called him out and he laughed and admitted to being buffoonish. Maybe bc he shared some insight he had, or bc he jokingly called one of his rants "white people problems" admitting his privilege. It's like I'm seeing the man I met again. Someone with insight, although often delayed, still he sees things and follows up. Maybe bc I'm focusing on the things I like vs the things I don't. When did I switch that?? I wonder how long this trust and love feeling will last. I like it, it feels really lovely. Warm and snuggly like.

I allow myself to love, and at the same time I do not attach to the feelings. I am cautious but relieved to no longer feel so anxious. Five days later, I still feel close and safe with M.

February 26, 2021- D we're halfway maybe a little bit more of Panthera it's 12:57 and in the high 30s. In therapy today FJ made a really important observation. She was saying how the child needs everything from the parent. Everything. And that maybe that's what

we do in relationships when we deal with [fear and] stuff with our partners. We want them to be everything to us. We think we need everything from them to survive when we don't. I think the implications of this are very clear. It's a recipe for pain and disappointment. I'm still marveling at the clarity that I feel I have regarding M now. Like suddenly he's no longer [an absent attachment figure] and he's no longer unsafe. Part of it might've been owning my shit. Letting him know I'm not going to bow to him. And that I'm also gonna show up. Asking for reassurance which he provided.

I want to think there's a formula to this, that there's just something that could be done quickly to separate and to stop the catastrophizing, stop all the negative thinking and projection which was so clear. At the time I was completely convinced all of it was him. Now I look at it and I say no. I don't think it was. But maybe the formula is just to work through it and be present with it.

There is no way to "know" your way through this. I do think you have to feel your way through it. Test your way through it. And also communicate. I feel really grateful that he stuck by me even when I was all over the place. I definitely wonder if and when [the anxiety] will come back, but for the time being I'm just enjoying feeling love and gratitude and joy. I've been seeing him as a flawed but awesome man that chooses to spend time with me. And that I choose to spend time with.

I am feeling so secure and loved. But then even as I am realizing I am not a child, he does not need to be everything for me because I have me, I try to undermine myself through self-objectification. I catch myself and re-ground:

February 26, 2021- D cont. I'm definitely struggling with the aging thing. Feeling chubby and just saggy and old. I am so much more than my age. More than my beauty. I'm much

more valuable. And then I did this exercise taking two pictures: one “ugly” one “pretty,” [see companion movie Appendix A] I’m looking at both of them and saying one isn’t more valuable than the other, one isn’t more worthy than the other. I don’t believe it, but it’s an important exercise to work through.

This morning I had the scary thought about how it’s going to be harder and harder for me to meet people when I’m less attractive. Oh well. We’re all aging. I do know though, that I don’t want to be alone. And so I’ve gotta balance that. And make sure that that doesn’t rule me and my decision making. I can’t sacrifice myself. It doesn’t work. You can’t hold on to somebody. Everything is temporary.

And also talking to FJ and marveling at this dissertation. How the divorce, and M, and Covid, and all the things just fell into place at exactly the right time. Just when I needed it. I don’t have to fight anymore. Fighting doesn’t help me. I can trust the universe. I can trust what can happen next. I don’t need to worry about the future; it will all happen the way it is intended. I am held and loved and lovable. Everything’s gonna be OK. Oh and one more thing, I was also marveling at how my poetry from last March was saying all the same things that I felt I discovered through my journey.

You can’t know your way through life. I mean you can, but not if you’re me. Not if you want to be free.

I try to understand how I was able to finally calm my projection and attachment anxiety spiral and eventually just assume it is through processing internally and externally. Looking back, I cannot disregard that it may also be because I started this flirtation with someone else, that M was supportive of, and A, my ex-husband, was back in the picture.

I am 281 pages into this “knowing,” and I am repeating myself over and over again. I

keep wanting to just end this. Why do I continue to bombard you with these details, these repeats? It is embarrassing! Why can I not just *apply* and *stick to* what I keep telling myself over and over again?! *The answer is right there in front of your face! Center the experience on yourself and accept what you see and feel! Prioritize and advocate for your needs! Be brave! Walk into your fear and you will find that there is nothing to fear! Stop projecting! Own your experience! If you do not like how other people are, move on! Remember that you have yourself, you have your spirit animals, you have the woods, and you do not need anybody else! I love you! I'm never leaving you! You are okay just as you are! Be! Be! Be!* However, knowing does not work. Practicing works until it no longer works.

I keep making small gains over time, but it is unclear if I will ever stop obsessing or analyzing or living in fear. Can I accept that? Will accepting that free me, or will I forever alternate between love and freedom and unnecessary suffering?

My security with M *and* the focus on my body continues. I do an exercise where I pictured an anorexic woman and a morbidly obese woman. I then assessed at what point I found their bodies at an attractive, and thus acceptable, weight. I was trying to help myself see how I was applying oppressive norms to myself and women in general. I attempted to accept the middle ground, where my body was at that moment, which was still quite thin:

March 4, 2021- D, High on Thursday night I'm realizing how much I sacrifice my comfort to appear attractive [to others]. It's so engrained I don't even realize it. Even when being tortured by shingles, I didn't put my hair up [which is more comfortable, because I assumed I looked more attractive with it down]. And I was consciously accepting that sacrifice. This must stop. Even as I wrote that, I worry I can't do it.

I was starting to feel powerful again, and attached to M, so it makes sense to me that I am again

focusing on my appearance.

March 4, 2021 - D cont., After afternoon sex, where M actually stated what he wanted vs trying to put it on me, I started thinking “it’s become a bit of a mission for me to help you identify, own, and articulate what you want” and I started thinking, shouldn’t *I* be on a mission for *me* to do the same for what I want? Well yes, obviously! I also was thinking that by saying what I want, that gives permission for other people to articulate what they want. The big challenge here, or the question is, whether or not people feel obligated to provide it. I’m hypothesizing that if both people feel free to say what they want it’s more likely that they’ll be able to refuse instead of doing it out of obligation and then building resentment.

I was practicing my way through projection and personal responsibility. I had also been working with M to share his desires while remembering that I must share mine without expectation that the answer will always be “yes.” I also know myself and understand how painful I find rejection and the lengths I will go to avoid it.

All told, I allow myself to feel secure with M for nine days. Then it seems like the spiral is starting again:

March 5, 2021, This morning after sex I felt so close to M and he was holding me and it felt so connected. When I asked what he was thinking he said “honestly, about my grocery list, and [practical stuff]” I appreciated his honesty, but I got scared. He said “I’m going to jump up to use the bathroom then walk the pooch around the block before I leave” I said ok but then curled up to cry. He asked what was wrong and I said that it’s ok that he was where he was but I was in a different place, he said, “I don’t understand. I feel so good after we have sex, I feel so good about us, about you, and it makes me want

to take on the day! These feelings really motivate me!” and I said, “we aren’t in different places exactly, I feel good about all these things too but then that takes me into a feeling vs action place. I like to lean into my feelings of closeness, really experience them.” He started to get upset like, “I shared honestly with you how I was feeling and then you curled up into a ball and started to cry, and then of course I start thinking what did I do wrong?” and I said “Honey, I’m really not interested in helping you to feel better about feeling bad that you might’ve hurt me. This is actually about my feeling good and close to you and wanting to be able to experience that and focus on that.” and he seemed to like that but he can’t really experience it can he? He was already going 100 miles an hour. We’re different people.

I sent him some sexy texts again when he was home. And he basically ignored them. Well, he acknowledged them, you know, with a “damn!!” But they don’t really do anything for him. At least they don’t engage him. Maybe they do, I don’t know. I feel powerless. Last night when he said that he wants to devour me, I wanted to ask him “what is it about me that makes you feel that way?”

I want to reclaim my sexual power, as I was not able to get my sexual needs met with past husbands or lovers, and I am scared to death that this will happen again. I want to know how to entice him, seduce him, but he just seems to spontaneously want me. I want to know what it is about me that excites him, and how I can do more of it. The challenge is I know what excites him. He says I am sexy (i.e., my body and my attractiveness), and that is fleeting. I am more than my body! Additionally, what happens as I continue to age? Similar to my past lovers, M says that finding me sexy is more than just my looks. However, I am not so sure, because each time I ask him what he likes about me or what turns him on, he says, “you’re fucking hot!” When pushed

he says that “being hot” is not just physical, it is the whole package. Still, where is my power in this? I still feel like a passive object for use, and I do not know how to reconcile that.

March 5, 2021 cont., I can’t expect him to provide for me what he’s never experienced [being held and seen and valued just for who I am, not for what I offer]. Still, this is a conscious decision that I am making to be with him. And he is a great test subject because he provides all the space for me to explore these things. I just need to make sure I [continue to explore]. And that I don’t get my heart involved in it. But my heart is involved in it. So maybe it’s about not having expectations?

And anyway, this morning my upset was not that we were in different places, my upset was my confusion around how and if I can interpret his behavior. He continues to ask me to look at what he does as proof and description of how he feels. But if he’s holding me closely and lovingly and thinking about his grocery list, how can I trust that? How can I trust my interpretations? I can’t. And I’m trying to get away from interpreting and from living in a fantasy. So now I’m confused. And I don’t know what to do. Each time I bring it up he says he is channeling things into touch and action. But I don’t want to do all the interpreting. Should I simply take him at face value and not try to get from him anything other than what he offers (which is quite a lot!) or try to help him access more emotion so he can feel with me?

I’m afraid of how destructive his suppressed emotions are. But mostly, when I’m honest, I’m worried about suppressing my emotions around him or not being seen. There’s no way this dude can see me. He can’t accept or even recognize when *he’s* being seen. He has so few tools. A stopped by and took one look at me and knew I was really ill. [Alternately] last night when I was feeling even worse than when A saw me, Mr.

Peanutbutter asked if I wanted to go out for a drink. He sees very little and what he does see he wants to solve, maybe that's not fair. But yes, he's not a feeler

...in the end, I need to be sure I'm not sacrificing myself or putting myself through any sort of unnecessary suffering. And as an emotional person, this gets complicated. Basically, it's never exactly the right time to make a decision bc it will surely change. So am I being loving to myself by staying and enjoying what I've rarely experienced? At what point do the challenges or lacks outweigh the rewards? How much can and should I accept? That sort of shit. And how can I separate all of this from my baggage so I'm not running from something that really is serving me? [I then analyze this to death]

Ultimately, I let my mind tire itself out and got back to living in and trusting the present moment and my ability to act in my best self-interest when and if the time arrives to act.

After spending nine days feeling madly in love, I find another "problem" (his MBTI [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; (Briggs Myers et. al, 1998)] type, ESTJ [i.e., Extraverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging], which is the near opposite of mine, ENFP [i.e., Extraverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Perceiving]), and based on this information, I do not know at this point if I should stay or leave the relationship. I am concerned that we will never be able to share a language; that we are too different. I can see myself starting to spiral-withdraw. I am watching it happen, but it is like watching and analyzing a plane crash from the cockpit *and* the ground. The next day, I have another realization, and the plane rights itself, again:

March 6, 2021, MK and I went to Panthera today and I talked to her about my M troubles. She said many things that actually really opened my eyes to a few things. The first thing is I realized that M has the same Myers-Briggs type as my mother. And I

thought about the work it would take for me to appreciate those differences and not demonize them. It would take a lot of work! And also I have despair about that, about, I guess, my ability to appreciate the differences without demonizing them. Second, MK was talking about being somebody that “shows and not tells” and that the other side is the quote “talk is cheap” and I was thinking about after sex, when M was talking about his grocery list, he was also thinking about stuff he needs to get to make me dinner or to make [his son] dinner for that matter. And that came from a place of love.

So MK said that he’s thinking about me, he’s thinking about me and thinking of things that will make me happy, and then doing them. And that this is an expression of love. And I felt really whiny being like “yeah but it’s how *he* expresses his love, and if he’s really interested in making *me* happy, he would listen to how *I* needed him to express love and he would provide that. How could he truly be interested in making me happy or showing me love if I can’t see the love he’s showing?” And I started thinking ‘yeah, well I’m doing the same thing in some ways, I’m trying to show him love in the ways that I know and he’s not necessarily getting them.’ Maybe I shouldn’t be saying so much, maybe I should be doing more, I don’t know? Well I do know actually, I need to ask. And then see if I can do it. And then be able to understand how difficult it is and how well intentioned a lot of it is.

And then it gets back to the initial question, is that enough for me, can I accept that without being triggered by it or always feeling denied? Because the fact of the matter is, he doesn’t really see me the way that I want to be seen. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t see me. Because he does see you, just sees different parts and acts upon them.

I do think I need to talk to him about if he has the capacity to slow down enough

to show interest and curiosity in me, because I can get used to the rest of this I think, and I could train myself to feel and appreciate the love I am receiving, but I can't spend all of my time with him feeling like I don't exist. Feeling like I'm in the M show. Because I don't want to be in the M show. Thank you universe! I'm laughing so hard right now.

I think it is clear when using the attachment framework that while I am believing that I am securely attached to myself. I remain in an anxious-avoidant attachment state with M.

Meanwhile, A and TG (the new woman I am dating) are helping me with my anxiety, classic triangulation. I continue to try to be calm and logical. Sometimes it works; but for how long?

Below are two excerpts from the same day: one in my "dating" notes, and one in my "woods" notes.

March 8, 2021- D, It's 4:24 and I'm a day into not seeing M. Wait, I had sex and breakfast with him this am 😊 well, I'm missing that big bafoon. I needed space and now I'm missing him. Maybe I love him. I am feeling love towards him. Wanting him. My feelings are so confusing!!! Maybe I just want a hug. Maybe it's ok to just feel what I'm feeling, which is a longing. A longing for comfort and sex and someone to help ground me. I feel teary saying that. I feel sad. Maybe a little lonely even though I had so little alone. Maybe it's the pot or the alcohol or the sugar crash.

I want my M. I want to know what we are, I want a clear definition that calms me. I will not be getting that. I will not get clarity other than the knowledge that 3 days a week I see and hold and get kissed and fucked by this man. I laugh with him and he exasperates me. We eat yummy food and drink and sometimes smoke pot, we overindulge and sometimes talk deep and sometimes disagree and he feels good to me. He feels solid and sexy and mine at times. We have something indefinite and that's what

this is, I suppose. A boyfriend, a lover, a playmate, a partner of sorts. I can accept that, right? I was just thinking that I'm not sure I should be in a relationship.

My marriage makes more sense now, because I'm an anxious mess and time with A kept me calm. I'm way overthinking things and I'm realizing that when I fully accept myself my emotions are so yo-yo-ing! It feels "crazy." I want some grounding that stays consistent. That's why A was good and that's also why M is good. I need to stop stirring shit up. I need to stop the drama.

Maybe it will be good to understand why I feel I need to keep the drama going. In the meantime, he's so simple, straightforward. He's happy. He has everything he needs. He's not worried about a thing, why should he be? There's really nothing to worry about, is there? So what do I do with it all? Where should it go? Channel it into art every time?

And from my "woods" talk:

March 8, 2021, we're on the first bend at Panthera. This is our third day in a row back after four days off [I was in too much pain to even sit up]. I really missed it. I think it did affect me not being here. It really grounds me, reminds me who I am...

The Myers-Briggs stuff really opened up a door because it helped me to understand how I wasn't accepting differences. And how I was demonizing them, in fact. I understand that some of that is connected to how I was raised, being raised around STJs [i.e., Sensing, Thinking, Judging types] I'm just not really having a lot of visitors to my world. And having my world be so confounding to others and then dismissed. M isn't dismissing my world, he just doesn't understand it. He doesn't think like that. I did that whole exercise with the jar of gumballs [ask a person with a Sensing preference versus an Intuition preference to look at and describe a glass jar of gumballs and witness the vast

difference in answers] and it was exactly what you expect. But holy shit the sex! Last night was bananas. It was so intense I was completely focused on that, it felt great. So I've got a lot of work to do.

I have a few more realizations on my hike that feel helpful in the "knowing" place again. Does the knowing help me when I am spiraling? Perhaps temporarily, but historically the anxiety just gets louder and louder:

March 8, 2021 cont., ...One thing is for sure I'm learning that I'm looking for problems a lot. Often I have feelings and the first thing I do is try to figure out what's "wrong." I know that's socialization, but then I stay with it. "What is wrong?" I ask myself and start thinking of all the bad things, or the things that could be causing me pain, instead of being open to the feeling and maybe wondering what it's about. Maybe yesterday when I was really upset, worked up in the car, it was just that I was overstimulated? Even now I'm looking for what's wrong. Why does it have to be something wrong? Some progress I've had was explaining to M that it will pass. And I'm just gonna feel my way through it.

Also I've been learning to not share my "fear/what's wrong investigation." Especially with someone who remembers everything I say. But also maybe it's because it's not that something's wrong, maybe I'm just sensitive, maybe I'm just feeling things around me! Maybe it's OK, it's just a feeling, it doesn't have to be investigated or analyzed. It could just exist. What would that be like? Instead of running in to "do something" what if I just rode it.

Maybe it's the hyper vigilance and scanning for danger. Being with him so much the past few days I was again struck by how little I know him and how little we have in

common. And here I go again down the “something is wrong” road. But I know one of my anxieties was: where are we going? What does this mean? Are we just filling in time? Does it matter? Why would it matter to know where we’re going? This guy is steady. I recognize the illusion of control again. I challenge the idea that if I “knew” and could define the relationship, I could somehow be more in control, more secure. We “know” that is another fantasy. Do I want to spend the time we have together fearing when he is going to leave, or spend it enjoying the love and sex? My decision regarding this question is the only thing I can control; all we can do is experience how things unfold. As far as influence, experience tells me it is likely that staying in the positive will result in a positive outcome, and the negative, a negative one. Still, my anxiety eats shit like this for breakfast, it is impervious to logic!

March is a good month for me. As a Pisces, I am in my element, and I have a lot of clarity:

March 9, 2021, I was reflecting on all my emotions as we’re walking up Panthera this morning. It's now 7:38 AM about 29° out and I noted also of course that I was obsessing about relationship. When you look at my Myers-Briggs type you can see that that’s how I view the world, so maybe it’s not obsessing, did you ever consider that? Maybe that’s just how you view the world, that's the lens you view the world through and so when you’re worked up, you start getting really sharp about it. I think we should look that up later.

Anyway I was noting why I would be all churned up—Spring is coming and I need to remember that and channel my energy towards that; change is happening, a lot of change (see: Spring), I’ve been in agony for almost a full month, my birthday’s coming up which always churns me up, I have this massive fatigue which scares me, there’s this new person that I’ve been flirting with, things with M have gotten heated up a bit, let’s

not forget the coronavirus! The vaccine! Being quarantined for a year. And all the things that that's bringing up, along with what's happening in the world, which is bananas. It hasn't been a full year since really being committed to divorce.

There's a lot going on, plenty to be worked up about. But also, we've learned not to be in the mind so much, that it's not a good place and there's a lot of anxiety there, but being in my body does not seem like a good option right now. My other option is Spirit [Source] [Magick Magick Magick just chased a turkey up a tree I had hoped it was an Owl it was not] so here I am in the woods, there's a ton out here to distract me, though it's still winter so it's not quite as flashy. Soon with Spring everything will be waking up and that will be a beautiful way to engage in the world in harmony and peace. We were greeted by more variety of birds than we had in quite a while this morning. And the crows!

I am starting to wake up, but the undercurrent of my body monitoring continues unabated:

March 9, 2021, cont.... I suppose I should know because it's been very centered in my mind, that my weight is creeping up again. I didn't drink and barely ate for four days and I stayed at exactly the same weight, not an ounce different every morning. Then this morning I was .8 up The other night when I was having that amazing high sex with M I kept seeing myself in the mirror and getting upset because I look chubby. I was 143 pounds. I'm really not chubby. And even at 143.8 pounds I'm really not chubby. But I do need to stop eating junk. Not just for my weight, but the sugar and the carbs and obviously it's not good for me, my body and how I feel about myself. I keep trying to stop myself from feeling all these feelings, from being anxious etc. and I forgot to just

say yes. So today I'm gonna say yes to everything. And see how it goes. And by everything I mean I'm gonna try. I love you.

I am reminding myself that analysis is not acceptance. Meanwhile, Spring is coming, and the forest and I are starting to wake up. I am also about to meet TG for the first time:

March 10, 2021, it's 9:03 am, probably in the low 30s we're halfway back from the top of Panthera. Walking in the woods today I was telling the trees and anybody else who would listen that Spring is coming. And they're gonna wake up soon. I was also thinking that it really is time for me to start analyzing this data. I want to be really clear with myself that just because I'm moving to the next phase of this dissertation doesn't mean that we're going to stop doing what we're doing. These hikes are everything.

I was thinking about the criteria for a good autoethnography and they say that there should be a clear path showing where somebody was and where they are now, who they were and who they have become. And I was thinking I'm in a circle. I just see myself more clearly, I'm not somebody different. I think I'm just more myself but awake. Part of me is really excited to have everything wake up again and part of me is already mourning the loss of the quiet. But I can make quiet when I need it.

TG [this woman I had been flirting with] is coming from [the city] today. We'll see how that goes. M was over last night, he worked until late. I got high because the pain was so bad. But everything feels really good with M. In fact everything feels really good aside from being in agony. So I wanted to note that to myself also, a reminder that these deep intense emotional states, when I'm in them, I feel like they eclipse everything, but they pass. Every time.

Part of me wonders what that's about and part of me just accepts that's the way that I am. Nobody has to be blamed for that. I don't need to understand it, I just need to learn how to embrace it. No shame, no anxiety or if that comes just saying "yes" to it. See I'm still working on that! Maybe I always will. That's OK too. In fact everything is OK.

Also interestingly, the 3 pounds that I couldn't drop were gone this morning. 140.8 I don't really get it. Right now I'm just thinking it's because I started hiking again. So I'm going with that. The woods and the forest, thank you.

I am feeling centered, calm, and clear. I also have several things to distract me from my relationship anxiety: a. I have realizations and reminders about my identity, b. I have another person to focus on, TG, c. The seasons are changing, and everything is just starting to wake up, and d. I am starting to shift my attention to working on the analytical aspect of my dissertation.

March 11, 2021, it's 7:13 AM probably close to 40° we're heading back from the top Panthera. It's been very quiet today. We saw three turkeys and that was it. I haven't heard a peep yet. It's foggy and you can barely see across the pond. I was thinking to myself why I'm always looking for a problem. Like trying to figure out what's wrong. As we talked about the other day. And part of me wondered if it was a fear of missing out, or fear of missing something that was right in front of my face. Both of those are happening anyway when I'm looking for problems. My life is passing me by while I'm stuck in my head wondering what's wrong and how to fix it. Or wondering what's wrong that I'm missing. All the while I'm missing my real life.

But the idea of just living without this analysis, just enjoying, that feels really uncomfortable. So obviously it's something I should try. Certainly it's important to consider that maybe it's more interesting and there's more room for opportunity when

‘bored’ versus anxious and worried and searching for problems all the time—to be analyzing all my relationships and my feelings all the time. It really does feel close to all the time, it’s certainly most. I understand maybe that’s my lens for viewing the world, but expanding is part of this isn’t it? Using different lenses to view the world is what the animals were teaching me about early on. And perhaps now that I’ve been spinning in circles for however long I can try that idea back on. Being able to shift at will. Certainly Owl doesn’t think that it’s a waste of time to be waiting and watching. Mouse does. But I can choose.

Finally, after months of anxiety and analysis, I circle back to Being and discernment. Then I circle back to non-attachment, another place where I feel deep feelings but still have freedom:

March 15, 2021, I did Panthera this morning with NJ. It was like 15° out and freezing! I recorded some tree talk. I did Panthera yesterday with JK. But we climbed the mountain to the right of the purple trees. It felt really good but also dark somehow.

Journey with JK: I was Owl and I asked Owl ‘I need to know about this season and how to prepare’. Owl flew to the top of the trees. I flew next to her but she told me to find my own tree. When I looked out over the highest tree there was nothing but fog. Owl just shrugged; she didn’t have anything to say about how I can navigate the next season. I became Snake, climbed down the tree. I tried to do snake things but I couldn’t stay as Snake. Snake started eating me, starting with my left hand, looking me in the eyes the whole time she was eating me. Suddenly I’m in her belly. It’s total darkness. Mouse visits and was dancing around and said that I still needed to work, even in the darkness. I said ‘but it’s dark!’ Mouse said, ‘do it.’ So I was typing a lot in the darkness as I was liquefying. Mouse then took a bite of me and said she would catch me later. I was typing

and liquefying at the same time. It's all blackness. Once I was liquid it was just dark and I tried to be Snake but was just not very good at it. I bumped into Mouse, she was intensely looking at me and said 'mice and snakes can't be friends' and she said 'you still need to work through the dark, you still need to be vigilant and use discernment.' she also said 'don't hang out with snakes unless you want to become one.'

Reflecting on this journey I started thinking that transformation doesn't have to be agony. Part of what Mouse was saying was that you can't just collapse into it, you have to work through it. This is about nonattachment to me. I told JK that I feel like I'm in this loop repeating the same things over and over again until I learn from them and then I can move to the next level, as if this is a video game. And maybe it's not next level, maybe it's just that the pattern is shorter, or there's less pain.

Grieving doesn't have to be agony. Transformation doesn't have to be agony. If you're not attached you can balance the loss with the new beginning. You can still grieve. You can turn off the mind because there's no way to see what's coming next, and you can just stay alert and engaged even in the darkness. Without fear. With curiosity and also, it doesn't have to be a big deal. The only thing that makes transformation agony is fighting it or holding on.

Relationship-wise this is the same. This is the first relationship since [my early 20s] where I was with someone for 6 months without the [imaginary] future being spelled out, or with whom I didn't get engaged or married. This may not be totally true but it feels true. I don't have a future planned out; I am living in the now and working on nonattachment.

Non-attachment, Being, self-acceptance, and saying “yes” are all ways that I am freed from the prison of my mind. At this point I have enough distance from my spiraling anxiety to consider context:

March 16, 2021: I was also thinking about the pandemic yesterday and how somehow I’ve cheated this dissertation because part of it was prioritizing myself and centering my life on my own experience. And Covid made that easy. I wasn’t forced to test it very much. Getting the second vaccine I’m starting to think that my excuse for saying ‘no’ is gone. And now I’m gonna have to actually prioritize myself without an excuse.

It also feels important to note that the times where I did struggle to prioritize myself, a lot of that was based on just being so changeable. And centering my experience feels like its own challenge because I am so inter-relational ... I don’t think that’s a lack of identity now that I’m thinking about it. I think that *is* my identity. If you look at my sign and my Myers-Briggs type it all points to this, maybe if I just accepted that, it wouldn’t be such a struggle.

In summary, I’m saying that my experience is often dependent upon other people and that’s not just socialization as a woman, it’s also my personality and temperament and my life experience which forced me to be so adaptable. Just like [my sister] grew up in the same family and ended up totally different. How can I embrace this as a gift instead of seeing it as a way that makes me wishy-washy or unreliable? Same with emotion and emotionality. I wonder if trying to just embrace these parts of myself would open up some doors for me, maybe I need to [trust] and just see what happens? What could go wrong? Right now I just fight with it and try to use logic and reason and control ...

Am I just justifying dependency here or is this something that has a truth in it?

There I go again with the binary thinking. It's not this or this. I do have a gift for interpreting, but this is partially a control thing for me ... there's 1 million other things I could be thinking or feeling! [It's] like I don't trust people to come up with their own interpretations. I have been working on asking open questions and not giving my experience as an example. We made it to the top of Panthera and there's a dove up here.

Magick is also very excited because he saw something I don't know what.

I am working on self-acceptance here and trying to remember that my identity is in flux, because that is the sort of person I am. In other ways, I am dismissing my accomplishments: like suggesting that because of Covid I was not tested much, when clearly, at least with M, I was tested a lot! I am not sure if I am justifying, but even in reading this now I see that I was indeed tested. I did not cheat, so justified or not, it is my reality. If I can accept my reality and then work with it, I have freedom...

March 16, 2021 cont., I was just thinking through why it is that I always feel like I have to improve. Because that's what a lot of this is about right? Not accepting myself in some way or thinking I should be different or 'better'. And I was thinking well, I want to be better because I want people to like me and I want people to like me because I don't want to be alone. And I need people to talk to. And I want to be loved. But that's a high price to pay isn't it Rachel? To constantly be seeking to be better all the time so that other people will like you —sometimes even people that you don't even really like that much yourself.

And I want to 'get my emotions under control' or manage them better so that I don't embarrass myself in front of other people, so that people take me seriously and

believe me when I say something. That's the part that maybe needs closer inspection, versus [picking apart] every aspect of your identity and personality and wanting it to be pleasing to others. Specifically or in summary, I mean ... perhaps working on self-esteem and self confidence in who I am is what I really need to do. And with that lens, in that focus, become more myself, more accepting of myself. We knew this from the start but I lost track of it again apparently. Definitely a central idea. Like I need to [let go of trying to be] 'perfect' meaning always good and kind and thoughtful and insightful and just all my best qualities and thinking if I'm not perfect, people will just leave...

I should also add being thin to this. Part of me thinks if I'm not thin people won't like me, my boyfriend will leave me if I'm not thin, I think about this a lot. If I'm boring I think people will leave me. If I'm self-centered I think people will leave me, if I'm less than whatever it is that people want they will leave me.

But I also need to remember that any façade I think I'm holding up, people see right through. NJ's been doing this a bunch, sort of laughing at my less pleasant qualities in a kind way. Like "oh, no, it's not obvious that you change your mind all the time" you know what I mean? So it's a lot of effort to try to pretend to be somebody when people can see right through it right? How many times do we have to learn this? *Do you ever pretend to be your "best self"? Do you ever wonder if you're fooling anyone?*

If I have self-acceptance, I also have freedom; especially given how interrelational I am. If I love myself, if I have myself as a secure attachment figure, if I have the woods, then I can stop worrying that I need to be "perfect;" especially since I cannot be! It is all a ruse! A waste of time! People see straight through it anyway, so the only person I am trying to fool is myself! Of

course, later that day, I go to disparaging my appearance and suggesting it is also a ruse because: reality...

March 16, 2021, afternoon walk at secret place it is 3:07 about 36°. I've been doing a lot of Marco Polo [a video swapping app] lately and I cannot believe how old I look. Old and I have this weird double chin thing going on. And I am, no... it's partially that I'm tired and shingles but also I'm old! Turning 48 tomorrow. And I was just thinking that this idealized version I have of myself. In my pretty pictures, not my ugly candid—everybody around me sees all of me, not just the pretty moments.

People aren't gonna stop loving me because my age is showing or because I have a double chin when I look to the side. Or because my face is puffy. People don't love me because of what I look like. Period. But a part of me believes that they do and it's not just a part it's a very big part, it's a variety of parts that believe this. It's so ingrained. I didn't really get very close to that during this dissertation. I think I touched on it a bunch and I guess I'll see when I review my data, but I can tell from my own experience day-to-day I have not accepted my aging and I have not accepted losing my beauty. And I've not accepted that I am more than my physical beauty, no matter how much I say that to myself and believe that cognitively. That's some deep shit. And I really want to stop doing it. It's been bad during sex too, looking in the mirror and seeing my cellulite. I've been blocking my view and wishing that M wouldn't look too. I don't judge him for his imperfections.

Do I have less value because I'm not young and beautiful? I feel that that's a yes. Is it less power? Less influence? Less confidence? I can work on my confidence. I have to stop worrying about what other people think. Also because people probably don't

really think about it very much. When I'm looking at my friends I may notice that they've aged, but I don't love them any less. I don't think that they're any less valuable at all. So why are you doing this to myself? Why insist that this is a fact? Why judge so harshly and with so little compassion and acceptance? Abandon the why. Howl in the deep.

I am feeling, thinking, Being, doing. I visited my family (sister, brother in law, and niece) and when I returned:

March 25-26, 2021, it's 1:26 in the afternoon around 68° Magick and I are at the secret place. I went to Florida for a bunch of days and so I haven't been in the woods in forever. I really miss it. But I had some good breakthroughs, I feel. Visiting my family I stayed centered, and when I returned I was able to stay grounded and very quickly connect again with M. I wrote two poems, one last night and one today...

I feel nearly whole in the way that I can be. Meaning I'm not frozen but I am whole as in a river is whole, because it's connected to everything around it, it keeps moving but it's consistent, it's moving, it's consistent in its place, River understands its place in the midst of everything that surrounds it, works with it, engages with it, needs it, wants it, etc. I feel like that.

I have had a bunch of anxieties come up around affording my house and any number of things but everything's gonna be OK. The woods are waking up. Forest creatures are coming out or returning. The trees are starting to stir, and so am I. And as the Spring unravels and expands so will I. I don't have to worry about all that now. I know I'm flexible and adaptable. I know I'll do what I have to do to get things done and then I'll continue to work on staying centered in my experience.

Some surprising body stuff came up in Florida ... fitting into the same clothes as my niece. And she's so little. It didn't make any sense. It helped remind me that I don't really see my body for what it is. I'm always looking for flaws. I don't wanna do that anymore. I don't wanna worry about my age anymore or my body. It's a waste of my energy isn't it? It does not serve me. Not at all.

The Oversight (Poem 3/25/21)

Shut down in air, we plummet steady plummet steady...
 arms curled like wings to make room for others
 wings spread like arms, engulfing you and me and summoned lust and hurts
 carrion no longer rots, vultures find their sky, guts, my eyes seeking tumbles and relief
 Sun reels in like naughty children, raiding kitchen's closed
 I creep in like kicked dog, slinking to your hips, tongue in-and-out submission
 if I were to find my insides, would I turn them right side out?

deep in life's crypt I'm past middle, past misses craving hope and hope's death
 without sadness I am a husk and with sadness, shriveled maize
 wanting you and all to covet regardless, wanting to be craved as if I'm
 precious-rare,
 age improved and gloating
 wanting to find all I vanity-smother and air shit out
 wanting to release fears like moonbears, give them pools to splash
 wanting to find my own way just not without your company

shut down in air, we plummet steady plummet steady...
 trying to declutter the shadow of you, tides reach and disappear, reach and disappear—a mirror
 mirrors grasp my legs and yank, glitter me with finest sand, tenacious and absurd
 once, when your body shielded me from moonlight, I journeyed to night-garden,
 met a venomous snake, we danced together, naked, ecstatic
 in all our furrowed joy I nearly missed your hands, pressed on my back, driving whole self into me, nearly
 now days and days without, I wonder where my Chi ran off to
 I wonder if she'll come back, tail between legs, eyebrows crashing towards center
 or flooding in, another tide, demanding satisfaction
 near return, my longing tamped down a cigarette in sand, I call to her: come out
 sweet longing, you're safe, come stay

In the night, I'll crawl from under dirt, a worm shielded from beaks
 In the night I'll nurse gin and doctor bourbon, straight heal thyself

in the night, your body more than still-life, I will feast and feast 'til gouty and
 feast and feast some more
 In the night I'll drape myself, a shawl of want, too small to warm your back

still, daytime demands her due and so I rush home to you, to woods and barks and
 disrepair
 I'll see you there times two, me and other me, almost in sync, almost

Shut down in air, we plummet steady plummet steady...
 did I do enough, Be enough, repair, create enough?
 Womb gone I wonder if goddess still applies, again, in between home and clan
 Can I belong or just be long and nearly lean, plump enough for pushing,
 maybe pushed too far?

when moon rests full I'll make my death like muffins—you'll eat it up I
 swear—return as Tree, Owl, Eagle, Bear... I'll send an invite and catch you there
 but between reason, comfort, fullness, sheets I'll stretch and reach, claws out or in
 depending
 I'll make myself small to be loud, quiet to be large, lost to be reborn a risk-storm,
 taking what's mine and then some more
 Open yourself to me. Open yourself.

Landed (Poem 3/26/21)

Sure, lost in fantasy, I missed the left right business of return
 near instant swallowed by charm and adaptation, I remembered you so swift
 you'd think me winged, your eyes suddenly familiar, if only because similar to
 mine
 in the meantime, crocuses had burst free, claiming their soil like outlaws
 I wandered in and out when taken, mostly in, mostly in
 errands run head filled with landmarks and remarks said again, again now I wait
 under man-blanket, dishes done because "I can get used to this" is not a place I'd
 dare
 last night this morning arms heavy-wrapped around and through, me alight, you a
 sycamore I burrowed, this is my den, MY DEN
 but we know it's not or won't always be
 watching hands on keys remembering patterns and melodies thinking "know my
 body like that, please" I feel the rush of warm-wet in various places, darkest
 places
 raccoon settles on chest—feeling bandit—no tears this time but shoo! Let me cry
 if I want to! For what I have and what I will lose are just the same. what I want
 and what I question also is this way—a flight path, a breath-deep memory
 emotions storm and sizzle through my chest, throat, wanting the back of my neck
 kissed, wanting your weight upon me nearly too heavy to bear, your fur tickling,
 finding soft and rest
 dream destinations flit in and out a pretty tease, will that be? I want. I want and
 want. fantasy and reality sometimes aligned, can I accept it this time?

hope-aches tumble and lightning lick my throat, chest, solar plexus, I want to dance it out but oh the treads!! I want to sleep and sleep and sleep under cool sheets, high upon my sycamore and I will again. again and again for months I gather, even if you still hide from me (maybe) even if you never deeply love me (maybe) even if you still save your words but use your tongue regardless... relationships expire like any precious fruit, 21? 22? 32? until vine becomes tree becomes bee becomes weed? until I need more sun, more rain, more rest? until I'm pushed, erased, and left—no not this time, not again. for now I have your branches and shade. I have your shelter and change, still rooted but cycling, still steady and true perhaps if I fly away you'll welcome me back and I'll return to you.

I like to think those poems speak for themselves. They speak to me, and my heart listens. She recognizes them, and she welcomes them home.

Related to my poetry and understanding it's language, even though I spent so much time saying that I could not trust my mind, sometimes my thinking results in insight that is helpful for extended periods:

April 3, 2021-D, I just met with FJ exploring my reaction to M not responding to my art the way I want him to. Not being able to connect with him the way I like connecting typically. And the benefits of this to me:

1. It makes me diversify, so I don't lose myself in one relationship, I have to seek others and ensure that I get some distance, which is required for my maintaining equilibrium and, as FJ said, to get in touch with my "wild" which is really my authentic self, which gets scared when I'm around people too much
2. I have to affirm myself, I'm not getting validation from M, so I need to give myself validation
3. So much of my life I've spent trying to please people and get admiration from others and perform. M doesn't respond to my performance, this ensures that I'm

authentic and present. It's also showing me that I'm lovable just for me, the more myself I am the more I'm loved, even if he doesn't understand it, because then I'm affirming myself. When I try to be more like him I resent him and I'm a failure at it and I lose myself. I'm not lovable as him, I'm lovable as me

4. It makes it so that I don't over conform to him, because I know that I'm not going to get the same in return, so it helps with boundaries. I don't give away too much of myself I maintain my sense of self around him even though it's different from him because he's not going to adapt to me and I don't want to resent him
5. I don't want to date myself, I've already done that and it's boring, this man gets me in my body, I get to expand around him because it's not more of the same
6. I can't hide behind what I'm good at and can't use that power to control him

This realization around M, it came after all this intense love, followed by a scare that he was a narcissist, followed by a realization that I was also witnessing my rejected narcissistic traits in him. In the end, it feels like much of this is about power and vulnerability. Perhaps when I accept and embrace my power, my croneness, I will not lose myself every time I allow myself to feel secure and loved by someone who could leave me at any moment. Anyone (parent, husband, partner, friend) can leave me at any moment, anyone except me. The difference here is that I did not create a relationship of dependence or fantasy with M, so I need to accept my other power, which is that I do not need, I want, and that is more than okay.

April 4, 2021-D, Realized yesterday that part of my "art" stuff with M is wanting daddy to sit down and really care about, look at and discuss my art. To be able to sit in his lap, explain what it means and have him listen in that loving, attentive way one dreams their father would do. Listen and be proud of me, amazed in fact (even if it's not totally real or

warranted). Spending as much time as is necessary, asking questions and noticing. Not feeling rushed. Not fearing and anticipating inevitable distraction or criticism or indifference. It's so deep! And very young. So I will ask him to do that with me.

We spent the last few days together and I have been feeling so much love! Love for myself (last night in the mirror just feeling so hot!) love for M, love for what we are creating. And so much gratitude. It's like working through all my issues at once ... then getting the love afterwards, and the holding and listening, it's super intense. Talking to him about the narcissism fear and him looking into my eyes and saying "but you have to remember, I'm Mr. Peanutbutter. I spend all my time wanting to be good and trying to be good" and it's true, though I only half-jokingly said "That's what a narcissist would say, they always know exactly the right thing to say." Last night [I shared something I feel shame about and we had a great conversation about it, and then he mentioned something we should do in the future]

I was indeed feeling love, feeling emotionally grounded and logically clear, *and* sharing. I am learning how to ensure that my relationship with M serves me by working with his strengths instead of focusing on what I think I want from him that (I assume) he is not able to provide. My anxiety had significantly decreased, and the essential insights kept coming...

April 4, 2021 cont., one thing I was thinking a moment ago is, let's say [the love I feel from M] is fantasy, isn't everything? If I experience love, does it matter if it's 'true'? Does it matter if he loves me more or less than he says? No, it doesn't, because *what I feel* is true, what I am experiencing is everything and his feelings don't have to align with mine for me to feel this way. I also said something [to M when discussing our 'future'] like "that's true but when we inevitably break up..." in an offhand way [he reassured me]

and ...maybe we won't, or when we do it will be for expansion, not from anger or despair.

And talking to NJ yesterday about how expansion cannot happen when you are only working with what you know, expansion cannot be pain free.

I am not seeking to be happy, I'm seeking to be free, and freedom has costs and highs and lows. If we could stop seeing sadness and pain as "bad" and start trusting in the process, we'd be in a better place on so many levels.

My centeredness continues. I am Being: flowing with my emotions, living in integrity with myself, others, and the earth, and it is leading to big love, big feels, expansion, and freedom. Happiness is not the end goal. There is no end goal. Life is only experience, and no matter what happens, I am free when I can embrace the full experience. Is this ability to Be because I had worked through my anxiety and was more accepting of and attached to myself? Perhaps, but also, my relationship with TG was progressing. I had seen her a couple of times, and though it helped my anxiety and self-esteem, it was causing difficulty in my relationship with M. The last time I saw her it was after three beautiful days with M, and I ended up hurting M and TG and feeling horrible all around.

April 8, 2021-D: I think the bottom line with the polyamory thing is that I wasn't honoring my relationship with M nor was I honoring my feelings for M. Instead of accepting my [scared] feelings and working with them or even trying to change them, I was shutting them off to focus on another person. This to me is not ethical. This is a fear response. And making decisions out of fear is scary enough without bringing in other people. I'm sure we do it plenty of times in our lives, but when you're conscious about it, then you're making a conscious decision—once that happens, you have to act ethically. I mean that's a central idea behind ethical non-monogamy right? Don't use people. Be

transparent.

So I [ended things] with TG yesterday, and she handled it very well... I asked to be friends with her. I want to be friends with her, so we'll see if she decides if that will work for her. Before this, I had all the power of decision making and now she does. It's interesting that in order to be ethical I chose to let go of my power and I suppose also my responsibility. That's something to consider. Either way I feel really good about the decision. Even if I feel bad and am scared.

I stripped away more of my power here, and thus a bit of my responsibility; but I affirmed my integrity, and that somehow balanced it out. Since March, I have been working to wrap up my data collection. Realizations continue, and I suppose: a. I worry about continuing to do self-care in the woods if I am not held accountable to this process, and b. I wanted to provide a happy ending. There is no happy ending; it is just the beginning...

April 16, 2021, last night in bed with M I felt huge, absolutely enormous, and I told M. He thought that I was upset about it but I wasn't! I said 'I don't mean huge like fat, I mean like I'm really big!' And he said something like, 'yes you are, you're a very big person, you're a huge person, you're huge energy. I'm constantly surprised when I see you in your woods outfit to see how tiny you are.'

And it made me think this morning talking to FJ, the second part of the crone experience, not wanting to overpower or devour or even be more powerful than men. Not wanting to deal with the fight, but more, based on my experience, not wanting to become so big and powerful that they become dependent. Because that's like mother energy isn't it? And I don't want that dependency. ... and I don't want to lose the masculine ... the thing with M is that I don't think I can overpower him or devour him, nor do I want to.

Other people in my life became dependent when I was big, I became 'mother' which is the ultimate power on the one hand right? Well, I don't want to be the mother, I already have all my internalized children that are driving me crazy! I need a vacation. So tiring sometimes, and delightful too, but really tiring ...

So anyway, I'm wondering if I make myself smaller [lose myself] so I don't threaten men or drive them away or make them dependent, all outcomes that I'm not interested in pursuing at this time. But I'm gonna experiment with being big and see what happens. In this case being big means really embracing my power, because I'm curious if I'm not embracing my power, because of my worry that I'll end up alone. Even though that's OK too. And the idea from the other day when I said even if I wake up and M's gone and it turns out he didn't feel anything, it's still real to me because I experienced it. And it was awesome. So the fantasy is gone. I'm taking down my armor left and right and getting more and more powerful as I do it, don't forget.

FJ likened the cellulite spiral [i.e., when I obsess about my body] to contractions. I hope that's true. I hope I am giving birth to a new adult me. My current childcare responsibilities already feel like too much.

I am feeling like I am coming into my power; that I am grounded and sure. I am accepting of my yuckier qualities and able to stop anxiety spirals before I sabotage or run away. I am taking personal responsibility and owning my power and any related consequences versus handing over my power and then resenting and criticizing my partner when he does not live up to my expectations.

We Haven't Even Started Yet

The following poem sums up where I arrived in mid-April with M, or perhaps more

accurately, where I am with me, given he acts as such a perfect mirror. If you were to ask him where he was with me, I imagine he would alternate between being distracted by any number of shiny things and being Mr. Peanutbutter (i.e., licking my face and humping me, and playing the perfect daddy holding his princess while she cries).

Neptune and Mercury April 17, 2021

Not entitled for first time, likely not first
 Wanting attention and to hide hide hide, come find me
 Want a redo of early and longing and weird
 awake now, nominally awake bourbon soothes and hot sauce burns it circles
 round and up
 seeing is not being and being is not doing and doing is not feeling and you, my
 dear, are far far far from me
 cut me in half and half again, easier to swallow?
 damaged parts are sent to rest while I'm pounded pliable and soft
 reading this today tomorrow no way to tell which way is errant or
 insecure, whatcha gonna do?
 Asking for reassurance a lion's tail flocked by flies, which way does the wind lie?
 Can I be held by Self and you and Being Seeing Doing if only if only...
 you're suddenly free I'm almost me now we can find a time or can we?
 Am I invisible? Are you aware? Am I illusive? Are you still there?
 getting what I want a danger to your doing or is it?
 getting what I want a danger to the pace you set that sets me free a me that rarely
 exits
 getting what I want GIVE ME WHAT I WANT!! But what is that? What is that?
 Where is that?
 hidden so deep no way to find I can't decipher signs and symbols minced and
 sputtering
 want to be a truffle to your snout, a delicacy. a precious commodity but me and
 real and seen and fuck it all I barely can hold shape
 you barely can save face except you can and that's just me, holding water in
 palms, impossible
 I want to tell you so bad! but thoughts can't shape when I show up in vapor
 I surface swim, investigate then it's too much too much too much too much
 overflow don'tcha know
 no way to go or stay just all the all or none the none, a redo an undone
 I fall apart in your hand, a moth's worst day and you say, it's ok, everything will
 be ok.

Wake up under flooding light to feel the love rush fill my throat to choking
 last night returns where, twitching to swim, lust took love to deeper places held
 her under almost for too long

is it too much? no not enough go deeper deeper, hold me down, a warning rush
 don't come too close you came too close almost almost almost
 my pond or yours one and the same as eagles still fly and why is crackers in your
 bed, a nuisance
 so small I hide in rock shadow, surface only for flickering light
 a boulder, you rest at last
 I twitch and tickle, ready to race towards turn and face now now now —instead, I
 mold myself against your back, feet soft relaxed, yet still too many too much too
 much too much that's me not you or is it?

you wake, a bear, I meet you there but water rushing past you dip your paw in,
 take it out, I rage and rip but underneath —the surface calm a mirror
 hold it in girl, suck it in, now that's a good girl
 but belly soft perhaps could summon gentle pets and kindness-sympathy I don't
 want or do I?
 too close too close you circle again I can't lash out with legs arms bent present to
 you a kinship
 you take direction, shy reflection, bombast past my ruffled feathers circle back
 then rise again
 I hold on, spy rocky shores and boats shredded torn against the tide where I can't
 hide but you rage on like sunlight
 I take you in, more more more no block could stop the burning
 pebbled beaches, drink in hand, a tropical jaunt cut short by inner storming
 fetch me from my eddy, stop the swirlingness of lost and found and lost again
 come find me
 prop me up so pretty yes but gills need water, I can't escape
 there is no rest the loss is frost upon the window melting from your sun gaze
 clouds loom as they do, a call a ding the next thing taking you from me not me an
 analog of what I hope to be but rooted, sure, and reaching for the place of my
 undoing
 to start again
 again
 again
 but last night, tail flicking, scales wanting, hope, against your softest pelt,
 your sleeping form I whispered: I love you, I love you, don't leave me

As for how I am functioning as a partner, my projection is mostly internalized, where I
 witness, assess, and then take right action when necessary. I do not criticize or push M away, and
 it has been almost four months since I unintentionally tried to sabotage things; some kind of a
 record. I do continue to criticize myself through body shaming, but I see it nearly immediately. I
 do not (think I) pretend to ignore it, and mostly I work my way through that with love.

I am so grateful to have had the chance to directly work on so many of my attachment wounds; not to mention the lifetime of sexual trauma! Even after reading over my transcripts from hiking and other self-talk, which ended up being 232 single spaced pages of what felt at times like pure insanity, I have ten times more trust and confidence in myself than before. In facing and working with external and internal dragons I made new dragon friends, and I aim to live ever after with the ones that serve me. I am not healed, but I still turn to myself for comfort. I did all of this within the worst global pandemic in history and where I also ended my seven-year marriage. Badass!

It is now late May, nearly 9 months to the day from my official kick off date. I am proud of myself for intuiting and then meeting this deadline! The work on my identity, my integrity, and my secure attachment to myself; and the love and experiments, continue. I believe that I am finally experiencing what intimacy might be like, especially with myself, but with M too; even if it is for brief moments and with someone who is, admittedly, not familiar with intimacy himself:

May 7, 2021, In this case it feels like [experiencing intimacy is being] secure, I'm not dependent, I'm living in reality and it's not dependent on whether or not M is securely attached to me or not; it doesn't matter if I love him more than he loves me, it's still safe to attach to him because I do have myself and I do have the woods, this is maybe something that can help me with my constant worrying about him. Just like the woods aren't attached to me, M might not be attached to me... but I'm still secure and safe ... maybe I am the magic ingredient in this ... M doesn't have to be a parental figure that's never gonna leave me, or husband etc. because in the end there's me. So I don't have to hold on so tight...

How many times have I been with couples where one person is more invested or attached than the other? What if that was OK, because your stability and sense of self is intact? This is the opposite of enmeshment ...

I feel I am actually able to admire, love, and securely attach to M more than I have been able to with others, and I do believe that is due to my work with the woods and with myself. Here I am 11 days later, saying the same thing, as if it is brand new information:

May 18, 2021... Well, if the woods are indifferent but it turns out they were the best attachment figure of them all, why does how M feel matter if I'm getting what I need from him? It doesn't matter if I love him more, if he is or isn't committed to me, if he is using me or mad for me, it doesn't matter. If I am getting what I *want* from him, such as sex, fun, co-regulation, consistency, companionship, and then I get what I *need* from me and the woods ... if I recognize that I don't need him to survive, that in fact, it's not about him at all, he could be *anyone* that gives me what I want, I am free. So if I could just stop seeking a replacement parental attachment figure I'd be ok. If I could be that replacement, I could live in abundance without feeling threatened.

Yes there is still repetition, but I am seeing a positive trend. My loops are focused on what is working, what feels good, and more importantly, on me and the woods. I am saying yes to my problem solving, my anxiety, and my big emotions, and they are flowing through instead of clutching at me until we both drown. Thus, I say to myself, "Compared to the other scripts in our head, *it is* very new; so sure, you can be annoyed and skeptical about the repetitiveness if it serves you. You can also view some affirming repeats as good reminders until they are fully integrated." I like that positive reframing a lot. I think I will keep it for now.

I just asked myself: Did I need to go through all of the anxious and avoidant attachment

drama to get where I am in these relationships with myself, Source, and M (i.e., essentially right back where I started with little Rachel's instructions)? Could I have not just found an easier way to apply these things? I do not think so, because applying them is what created these experiences. The *experiences* created the healing, hence, there is no shortcut. Certainly "knowing" does not help. From what I can tell, in addition to little Rachel, adult me also "knew" all or most of these things for years. I am a couples therapist after all! I help people with this work every day! However, the idea of centering my experience on myself, that I did not know. I did not even realize I was not doing it. No, I do not think I could have skipped the pain—the building of trust and confidence, the self-acceptance, the experiments, and the mess. I think it is all important to experience and learn from, but only because I have yet to find a less agonizing, more efficient way.

If nothing else comes from these nine months, I can say and see that my experience of living and loving is excruciating and glorious. I am attached to this way of living. I must be, right? Otherwise, why would it keep happening? There is the "why" again, sigh. I do not know if I need to change it, if it could or will change, or if I will repeat these loops over and over again until I die. However, at this point I can confirm something; I hope from my wise-self, without too much denial, that much of the time I stay, feel, Be, and hold myself regardless. In addition, I want to reassure little Rachel that if and when it comes to it, I will choose me over M. or anyone else, every time; I think she believes me.

Chapter Five — Discussion

I embarked on my countercultural experiment with the intention of prioritizing myself, confronting internalized oppression and self-objectification, and building a cohesive identity in an attempt to develop a secure attachment to myself. My hypothesis was that if I had a secure

attachment to myself, I would be less dependent upon others and thus feel empowered and able to experience increased intimacy and desire.

What I found was that while I cannot claim to have a fully secure attachment to myself, contrary to how I have been socialized, being self-centered and acting in ways that serve me (e.g., prioritizing and directly advocating for my wants and needs) have led to increased security as well as increased self-compassion, empowerment, and greater access to and acceptance of more facets of myself. The process of developing a secure attachment to myself requires external engagement in order to understand my reactions, to see them, experience them, and then figure out how to work with them. Given my fearful-avoidant attachment style and fractured identity, I could not do this work alone. To support my self-attachment process, I found I have the capacity to use discernment to choose attachment figures (me, the forest, M) that can tolerate my attachment to them and provide me with what I require to navigate the anxiety that remains. This work also resulted in a much more cohesive identity, and when I find myself falling apart, I can dismiss the social construct and turn to the woods and the animals to bolster me.

Meaning-Making and Research Questions

The outcomes of this work are both personal and actionable. The actionable aspects—centering my experience on myself, engaging interpersonally with integrity through a more integrated identity, making decisions and taking “right action” based on and in alignment with what serves me—I see not as a solution, but as a process, a way of being, that must continue if I am to continue to live in integrity with myself. I could very easily slip back into my old socialized and nurtured ways if I am not vigilant with my process, though over time that may change.

The process I used was healing for me, and perhaps others will see themselves in my

journey. Maybe this will inspire people to try some things out, and maybe it can help with self-esteem so they can be a better guardian of themselves and nature. Maybe like me on my most aligned days, they can find themselves calmer, kinder to themselves, and more open, and this practice can lead them to be a better partner, friend, citizen of the world. From my current perch, the following is a summary of what I uncovered from a position of wholeness, that is, using my intuition, clinical identity, analytical mind, and my research questions as guides. This is followed by a connection of findings with literature and theory, implications for therapists, couples, polycules, families, and individuals, and a final conclusion.

Research Question One

How has the internalization of privilege and socially and culturally mandated rules, influenced my spiritual, sexual, relational, cultural, and physical identities and actions towards myself and others?

The effect on my multiple identities is vast and insidious. I spent a lifetime trying to prove myself, to attain enough status to be believed, to be heard and respected, and to be considered valid or relevant in an attempt to defy socially and culturally mandated norms regarding a woman's worth. Given this, to start off this dissertation suggesting that you not believe anything that I write is a huge step for me. What I meant by that was that what I have experienced and made meaning of is still suspect, though the process may have merit. As I attempted to strip away my conditioning, I found it was like stripping wallpaper in an ancient house. There is layer upon layer of it, and the process is messy, toxic, sticky, and seemingly never ending. I cannot extricate myself from my socialization, context, or culture, but I can remain vigilant in my process to live a more authentic life that is true to my Being and best interests.

The internalization of privilege and socially and culturally mandated rules took the place of a cohesive identity. I found I did not have a real identity aside from the variety of roles I was playing (e.g., professional, therapist, wife, friend, and sister). In short, my “self” was fractured. I tried to force myself to be what I thought was considered valuable in society: reliable, dependable, consistent, but I would often fail, and each time I did, my confidence and trust in myself would plummet.

I only partially engaged in relationships, creating an illusion of intimacy by deeply “seeing” people, helping them identify and embrace parts of themselves they had previously rejected, all the while deflecting any attempts to connect with me. I believe this distancing, along with unintentional undermining due to my own insecurity, created dependencies on me. Then, my learned skills of debate and emotional intelligence, and my charm and attractiveness, helped me maintain my fantasy position of power while silencing or projecting my own socially unacceptable attributes including my feelings of powerlessness. In reality, I did not have the power or the “knowing” I imagined. Much of what I thought I “knew” (even when thinking I knew I knew nothing) was not truth, but rather a complex fantasy which attempted to hide my self-rejection, self-objectification, and most of all, denial.

Consequently, I hypothesized, based on my experience with partners within this dynamic, the only way people could have any power was by withdrawing from me sexually, physically, or emotionally and effectively rejecting and abandoning me (i.e., fulfilling my attachment terror). From this standpoint, I ended up playing the *passive* victim, infuriated by my partners and others who I felt were acting like *active* victims. I hid myself, even from myself, and therefore spent a lot of my time in a fantasy that my ego insisted was reality. During my dissertation experiments, I watched myself seek to resist repeating this very dynamic. I had some success, and I have much

more work to do.

Witnessing myself in a new relationship showed how far I was from who I believed myself to be. It also highlighted that if I stayed attached to societal and cultural rules I could not live up to my idealized self or my concept of conscious relationships, especially given how indirect I *actually* am related to my wants and needs. I explored related ideas, that is, personal responsibility and empowerment versus passive aggressiveness, decentering self, victimhood, dependency, projection, and succumbing to societal pressures/socialization, and found that *I was in denial about and unconsciously exhibiting nearly all of these dysfunctional traits or actions*. Other times, I tried and failed to acknowledge the tiny voice that warned me or to accept my attempts at communication through my art.

Basically, before I really witnessed myself over the last nine months, I truly believed I was empowered, self-aware, straightforward, attuned to myself, and assertive regarding my needs. On the surface, one would think I was, but underneath was the insidious self-sabotaging behavior, resentment, and anxiety that kept me recreating what I feared most again and again, maintaining my position as an oppressed victim unable to get what I wanted or needed.

Research Question Two

What are the implications of:

1. *No longer applying oppressive norms and expectations to oneself and others, and*
2. *Engaging with oneself and others from a more cohesive and inclusive identity?*

The implications of both questions are also extensive and interconnected. When I was able to free myself from self-objectification and accept and engage with myself as a whole, flawed being, I gained access to myself, the person who typically directed her love towards others. When I shined my light on myself, I could provide the focused attention, reassurance,

validation, and respect I have always wanted. This provided me with bravery to pursue expansion. Along with this came the power of water, earth, and fire: rage, darkness, storms, confusion, transformation, and death.

Not applying oppressive norms and expectations to myself and engaging from a more cohesive identity also resulted in significant pain and grief. I lost people in my life by saying no to things, being too “wishy-washy,” or backing out of commitments that would not have served me. I no longer tolerated certain behavior that I found misogynistic, which alienated a couple of long-standing friendships. Stripping my denial, I had to confront old traumas and less than positive aspects of myself that were hard to accept, leading to increased fear, avoidance, and emotional withdrawal. I had to witness ways I had bullied myself, treated myself with disrespect, and acted in unethical or untrustworthy ways. In prioritizing myself I had to give up my cat, Ozzy, who I deeply loved (he went to live with my ex-husband), pulled away from friendships and my community, and dealt with increased anxiety in relation to navigating friendships, sexual encounters, and decision-making.

Still, every loss eventually resulted in more space and opportunity, because when I have full access to myself and the now, I have freedom, regardless of the external circumstances or how others treat, see, judge, or experience me. I have the freedom to make decisions, use discernment, and advocate for and apply myself using and building my strengths and passion. This freedom is synonymous with independence, power, and personal responsibility.

While the implications of this work include the loss of some relationships, they have transformed others. Specifically, when I am able to accept myself, I can acknowledge all of my parts and therefore do not need to project my inadequacies. I have much less urge to control, judge, or reject others. I am able to make decisions that free others to make their own choices

without the complications and pain of power struggles and disappointment. I am also able to live by and model self-love and acceptance, bravery, self-respect, and a wider range of human emotion and thus experience. I am not able to accomplish this all the time, but I can much of the time; that is progress. One thing I do believe has changed in my relationships is that I do not meddle as much, I listen more, and I have more patience and trust. I also am able to love and appreciate people for their gifts without the feelings of inadequacy that resulted in my disparaging, competing, or dismissing them. This will absolutely serve me.

These changes in my behavior and self-concept, along with the ability to Be, have also led to my expansion. I have allowed myself to be vulnerable, more adventurous, and experimental in my actions. Thus, I have learned and experienced more. I have experienced a different kind of love for myself and, subsequently, my partner; one that is more accepting, open, and curious.

I believe I am finally experiencing intimacy, though it is different than I expected. I had imagined intimacy as some sort of romantic ideal in which two people meld with each other and have a connection that transcends reality: total trust, openness and comfort, no pain, no fear, “perfect” union. Now I imagine intimacy is about trying to connect with myself and other from a grounded place of love and acceptance, and, even when unsuccessful or scared, being open and compassionate. For me, this led to the ability to actively be with my lover in full acceptance of myself and of him, sharing joy and my body generously—all through my own lens—without fearing abandonment, shame, or rejection—without need or self-sacrifice, because I still have me.

With prioritized connection to myself, I am learning the ability to hold onto myself—embracing personal responsibility, as well as the love I am given. It is helping to create

a relationship I am proud of, loving consciously and accepting imperfections, acknowledging projections, fear, shame, blame; moving through defenses to reestablish connection, without putting the heavy lifting of navigating these issues on my partner. I am loving myself and my partner for who we are as individuals; not for who we can be or who I want either of us to be. I am also creating and holding boundaries when necessary to maintain my still fragile identity.

If I continue to grow and expand through Being, I believe this will lead to me being a better citizen, lover, teacher, therapist, and friend. When I am able to strip away my defenses and internalized negative forces and the resulting dependency and self-rejection, I can see how they are barriers to these gains. When I have replaced these defenses with self-acceptance and access to all my available parts I have experienced grief, expansion, anger, freedom, loss, creativity, love, joy, and passion. I want more of all of those.

Applying these concepts on a larger scale, this freedom from the influence of internal and external judgement reminds me of the witch, the crone in the woods I referred to earlier in my process. I can see now why society continues to use that mythology, to make us (crones) dangerous, to make us laughable, and to make such systemic and concentrated efforts to take away the power we finally, finally recognize—the power to claim and accept ourselves, the power to be free.

As for my silenced non-binary identity, I did not do much work on this directly. I (like to) think that it was a matter of bandwidth and discernment. As the 9 months wore on, I found myself stirring up things less and just focusing on what presented itself throughout my experiences. I worked on internalized toxic gender norms constantly, and part of me wonders if this non-binary identity is another step to consider working with in the future. Perhaps it could provide me with greater freedom? One thing I can say is that on the surface I accept and am not

ashamed to share that I do not internally relate to the concept of gender, neither male nor female, other than in relation to the social construct. Beyond that, I am not yet prepared to let go of my physically assumed female identity, despite the pain it causes.

Research Question Three

As a childfree woman whose body was not used to bring children into the world, and no longer meets the ideal of attractiveness (young, taut, unblemished, etc.), what are the identity implications of the middle-aged body? Specifically, after a lifetime of being seen as an object, who am I and what is my purpose?

I started my dissertation thinking I would be confronting the experience of no longer being seen as an object of desire, and while that was true for me internally, externally things were different than expected. In most of my dating experiences, and most certainly with M, I continued to be an object of desire. The difference is that very quickly with M, I started experiencing my own desire and my own appreciation for my (aging) body. The limitation was that I only really appreciated my body during hikes or sex, and even then, only sometimes. In my daily life and interactions, despite my best efforts, my automatic reaction is to center my experience on others and align my sense of personal value on how I can be used by others, yet I refuse to internalize that I am also desired. Essentially, I can be my worst enemy, and I find that unacceptable, but nearly impossible thus far to overcome.

Our society is set up to imply that a woman's value is in her youth and beauty: from every angle, women are encouraged to stay focused on and dissatisfied with our bodies. Instead of developing an independent, empowered, and confident identity, society suggests we stay focused on what we have been programmed to believe is our value, such as our legs—are they too hairy? Are your thighs too big? What can you do about that disgusting cellulite? This list of

oppressive questions is a tiny representation of my internalized narrative of self-objectification and shame. I was in the shower after a hike—after listening to “Howl in the Deep” and sobbing in the car over the gifts I have been given—asking myself these very things when I came up with this idea.

Beyond beauty, the critical value of women is caretaking (DeVault, 1994). The identity implications of this combination seem clear: if you do not have beauty and/or an identity, focus on others. Feeling I was responsible for the health and wellbeing of everyone around me, *and* hating my legs, kept me distracted enough to not realize I should run away from society and its judgements and expectations. I did not have the energy or the confidence to stand tall and refuse to accept the external and internal misogynistic narrative or to refuse to sacrifice my mind and body to feed the capitalist machine. I did not succumb to the mandate to have and raise babies, but did that make me less relevant and accepted as a helpmate and supporter for the patriarchal machine? I am not sure. Perhaps it made it so I doubled down on sacrificing, abandoning, and focusing on hating my body.

Research Question Summary from Intuition

My intuitive, creative self has her own story about my identity, purpose, and the process and findings from my research. She shared it with me six months before I completed my data collection. In April 2021, I was again singing Howl in the Deep (written in late November 2020 based on a shamanic journey), and I realized the synchronicity:

Howl In the Deep (Lyrics) 11/23/20

I flew to the house, surrounded by wolves, deep in the forest shade
landing on the sill, I waited until the shadowy figure let me in
old as the moon, dark as a fright, the crone shifted into a crow
she filled up the room, much larger than doom, dwarfing the window we had flown into

In this (shamanic and real-life dissertation) journey I am Owl (symbolizing death, i.e., new

evolved beginnings, transformation/change, intuition, wisdom, and seeing in the dark—seeing through illusion). I fly to a house (the mind-body) in the woods, which is surrounded by wolves (symbolizing protection, pure instinct, freedom, and connection) where I have, in past journeys, sheltered a young version of myself (my inner child who I worked with throughout this process). At the attic window (looking into the mind) I see a crone (wise woman symbolizing wisdom, transformation/death i.e., me) who also may be reflective of my little one all grown up, cohesive, wise, and ready to be freed. At the beginning of my dissertation, my Crow (symbolizing transformation, insight, adaptability, intellect, and magick, and who incidentally is my main spirit animal) and Owl selves both flew into that room (the mind). During this process of transformation, from an injured child/woman back into Crow, I expanded, but as Crone/Crow I believed myself bound by the social construct and my community; I felt trapped.

her epic wings bound and darker than sound, she yearned to return to the night
so finding my fire, I burned out the roof and the giant crow quickly escaped
then taking flight, I burned the house down, I burned that house down to the earth...

Independent Owl cannot be trapped by the machinations of the mind or societies' expectations and therefore can come and go. When as Owl, I am let in and I witness Crone. I then showed my Crow self; too large to escape through the mind (attic window) yet clearly needing and yearning to be released.

As Owl I find my fire (my new Being and empowerment) and use this transformative power to burn the house (restrictive mind, riddled with socialized constraints and limiting beliefs) down to the ground; meaning through fire, I transform the mind into a fertile and safe place, that is, the earth. Through this action, I feel confident to set the integrated Crone/Crow free.

the wolves walked away and I asked them why, why did they leave her there to die?
Wolf said: Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you're asleep

So I let out a howl, I howled and howled and Wolf said: This is the answer you seek
I turn back into myself, and per usual, I start asking a bunch of questions trying to figure out
“why” Wolf (intuition) was letting the Crone/Crow rot in the mind. Wolf tells me, basically,
“don’t use your mind to try to figure out how to escape the trap of the mind (abandon the why),
use your spirit, your instincts, your power to explore the darkness (howl in the deep)
don’t trust your anxious mind, it is wily, ruled by fear and socialization, and pretends to be
conscious when it’s not (your mind is the place you’re asleep).” When I do speak freely, Wolf
says this will result in the ultimate answer I seek: freedom. (Even as I write this I am thinking of
interpretations of “why” Wolf would not have intervened. I do not know if I will ever learn.
There is the knowing again! It is an endless loop!)

later, deep in a dream, the wily and strange pull of the mind beckoned me
I returned to the house, it was lousy with blame, lousy with regret and shame
the curse begged me to stay and I couldn’t look away yet I knew this time I would
awaken, and soon enough, that’s just what I did...

Later, when my wolf self goes back to “sleep” (back to my mind and all the anxious “why”
feelings), my anxious mind wants me to stay, my ego wants me to stay, and I am tempted, as
usual, to stay in these defenses. Finally, I understood it is not a healthy or safe place for me, and
still I can be tempted. Yet, even if I fall back into the pattern I will not be caught for long:

... and Wolf she repeated to me:
Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you’re asleep
Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you’re asleep

When I am Owl and Wolf, I am free. Just to be sure I don’t forget, Wolf reminds me again and
again: abandon the analysis, howl from your heart, from the darkness from all those places that
you rejected, and remember, if you go back to your mind it’s all a dream, a fantasy you create,
it’s not reality. When you go into the anxious, logical, why place, you’re actually
sleeping—you’re not awake, analyzing is not Being.

Early on in my process, my intuition said the Crone/Crow journey was really important, and I turned it into a song I listen to or sing over and over again. I do not feel (though I sometimes think) I need any more proof; the centered, feeling, intuiting, aligned place is where I am most at peace and able to accept myself. From there I can also best connect to and help others, especially those who are also trapped.

“Howl in the Deep” was a song that had a strong effect on me throughout my dissertation journey. When I was lost, scared, and confused I would listen to it, and it would ground me. It would re-center me on Owl and Wolf teachings—on *Being* versus thinking—and now that I am analyzing it, I can see why it was and still is so effective!

As for identity, I can Be as Crone, Crow, Owl, and Bear. I can learn discernment from Mouse, expanded vision from Eagle, trust from Goose, community from Bee, resiliency from Roach, and so on. I can learn to trust myself, because yes, I am emotional and changeable. This mostly means I can tolerate multiple realities and hold them lovingly all at the same time. When I get lost, I can fall back on Source. Source gives me information through songs, through Being, drumming, and journeying. The mind tends to keep me running round and round in circles unless I use my executive function in conjunction with my feelings and intuition. Ultimately, I can listen to logic and reason, but I need to use my intuition and my connection to Source, not my mind as my main squeeze. This is not the answer for everybody but based on my experience; how my mind works; and my capabilities, sensibilities, and temperament, this is where my freedom—and thus identity—is.

We know from all the fairytales what happens when a crone shows up owning, loving, embracing, and living from her cohesive identity: she is powerful and thus a threat. It makes sense that society would make concentrated efforts to discredit or demonize her. For the love of

God! Keep your children away from the witch in the woods! She will fatten them up and eat them with wicked abandon! Kill the witch!

This brings me to purpose: what if we did not have to wait until middle-age to claim our power? What if little girls were raised with the understanding that their value was not their body or how they served others? What if it was clear that their value was in who they are; what they love, create, and achieve; how they express themselves; and how they lead, learn, and love? Being secure, confident, independent, loving, and centering on and prioritizing yourself costs nothing, but it results in the power that every woman, every person, and every girl can have access to right from the start; even with all the cards stacked against them.

I hope as a crone that I remain somebody who seeks to witness and accept my ever-evolving self, independent of external expectations. I hope as a crone that I am someone who seeks to prioritize myself and pursue what brings me joy, pleasure, and freedom. I hope to model and help society witness and accept the potential that can come from self-acceptance and self-prioritization, being unaffected by society's rules and expectations, and meeting your own needs whenever possible.

Revisiting the Literature: Methodology Process and Reflection

Adams and Jones (2008) suggest that autoethnography “hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural, and political concerns” (p. 375). I cannot think of a more accurate description of the process of this dissertation. Using estrangement techniques as a social experiment (Adams & Jones, 2008), as a middle-aged woman, I sought to connect with and prioritize myself; then engage interpersonally from a more cohesive identity. During this process, I worked to use and articulate critical reflexivity, as I am excruciatingly aware that I am complicit in the issues I have identified

(Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Cosslett et al. (2000) suggest a researcher's sense of self can be changed by research and Ellis (2007) suggests that a successful autoethnography should show a distinct change in the individual. I do believe that my sense of self has been changed due to engaging in this process, but I do not think I have become a new person. I believe I have become more of myself. Similar to the ideas of Stern (2015) and Allen and Piercy (2005), conducting this autoethnography was transformational in that it provided an opportunity to connect to my vulnerable self, and from that position, transform from an oppressed identity to a more powerful feminist identity—sometimes.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that ethnographers challenge cultural interpretations by comparing the personal experience of societal influences with inward reflection on personal vulnerability. As I illustrated, feeling empowered and clear is one stop on my interpersonal circular process, and this would often come about after exploring issues of oppression and how they were influencing my behavior and thinking. In another synchronicity, I discovered this very personal, familiar, but undefined or acknowledged circular process through what Allen and Piercy (2005), described as the FA process—finding knowledge and connection by alternatingly traversing the external world of culture, society, and history and the internal world of vulnerable experience. In fact, Allen, of Allen and Piercy (2005), suggests that by connecting to her vulnerability, she gathers the courage to be accepting and open to herself and others. I found this to be exceptionally true during the data collection itself as well as the analysis during the writing of this autoethnography, another example of alignment of process and outcome.

From FST, Krekula (2007) suggests that even when older women are represented in research, it is still from a privileged perspective and based on a counterpoint of men. How can

we be certain, they argue that “it is *their* experiences that are in focus, that *their* voices that are heard?” (p. 156). Further, how can we know how inclusive these portrayals are? Are we to assume that all older women are the same or that there is a “normative” female identity (Krekula, 2007)? The answer, which I hope was apparent in my story, is clearly we cannot assume one normative middle-aged female identity. Given the variety of contexts, privileges, life experiences, cultural differences, etc., how can we minimize any person or gender into one category? In addition to understanding women in context and their intersectionality; Krekula (2007) points to the problem of referring to women of *reproductive age* with all the assumptions that are made regarding women being synonymous with motherhood. The intention of this dissertation is to provide one example of the middle-aged child-free identity and experience. Even if I am still technically in *reproductive age*, I had a hysterectomy: does that mean that if I wanted to, I could no longer claim a female identity?

Aside from literature on self-objectification and middle adulthood, little research focuses on the *process* or *experience* of building a secure attachment to oneself; engaging interpersonally from an anxious avoidant attachment; developing a cohesive identity; or overcoming self-objectification. This gap in the research is another example of why feminist autoethnography and feminist standpoint theory, both of which seek to highlight oppressed voices and incite action, are critical to addressing bias and continued oppression through traditional research.

Literature on body dissatisfaction and self-objectification does touch on the experiences of women, including middle-aged women, and there is an entire world of literature focused on identity. However, similar to the childfree literature, research is mostly quantitative (Lynch et al., 2018) and focused on measurement, comparisons, prevalence (e.g., measuring levels of dissatisfaction according to age; McLaren & Kuh, 2004), and the mechanics of how body

dissatisfaction in middle-aged women is developed or maintained (McLaren et al., 2004; Slevect & Tiggemann, 2011).

Middle-aged Childfree Identity

Aligned with the current literature (see Blackstone & Stuart, 2012) being childfree has little to no negative affect on my identity, quality of life, sense of purpose, or experience of loneliness (Letherby, 2002). I do fear that when I grow old I may not have someone to care for me, but it does not cross my mind that that should be “my child.” Rather, as aligned with Blackstone and Stuart’s (2012) finding that community support can replace family support for those who do not have children, I have and continue to trust I will have a supportive community.

According to Carter and McGoldrick’s (1989) Life Cycle Framework, identity revolves around one’s children, even when they are no longer children (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; McGoldrick, 2016). My initial argument was that without children, according to this theory, there *is* no identity for childfree middle-aged women. After witnessing how fragmented my identity has been for my entire life, I would conclude that this issue is not just about being childfree; rather, the issue is that there are few if any culturally sanctioned identity alternatives for all women other than in relation to others.

Finally, Gandolfo (2005) asserts that the stereotype for being childfree is that it brings freedom at the cost of not having access to “true intimacy,” also feels false in my experience. Contrary to Gandolfo (2005), I was finally able to feel intimacy with myself and with others. On the whole, I rarely thought about children other than working with my inner child or when imagining how challenging it would likely be for women with children to prioritize themselves as I had.

Oppressive Norms and Identity

According to Johnson and Moran (2013), women's relationships and identity are greatly influenced by shame. Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) found that women across the lifespan experience shame due to body dissatisfaction. Similarly, shame (and body dissatisfaction) was an ever-present influence on my relationships and continues to have an impact on how I experience my identity. In addition to my appearance, I did significant work on trying to accept rejected parts of my personality, which was especially difficult when coming to terms with my emotional parts. Eighan (2013) noted "the female alien (symbolically attached to irrationality/emotion) is threatening in her ability to contaminate masculine 'reason' with her emotion—a fundamentally stigmatic trait" (p. 22), and indeed, my experience of my emotional sense seemed both alien and stigmatized. Similarly, Twigg (2007) suggested masculinity was deemed synonymous with the mind and femininity with the body and procreation. I suffered greatly from my socialization to reject the body and privilege the mind, and this process has helped me to reclaim my body and the ability to create (though not procreate), as a central aspect of my identity (see Appendix C).

Krekula (2007) quotes philosopher de Beauvoir's (1949) hypothesis in her book critiquing the treatment of women throughout history, that men have the power to define themselves as subjects (i.e., essential beings), and thus women are by default seen as non-essential beings or "other". Given this, how can we develop identities if we are non-essential beings whose identities are defined by the external gaze (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)? For me, it was through my interactions with the woods and the animals. Galaty (2014) noted that one's sense of self is formed through a process of differentiating or identifying oneself with others and goes on to say that some cultures use animals to help clarify and develop identity. This was highly aligned with my experience, as I found my center, my most cohesive experience of

identity, and how to “be” from the woods, from practice, and from observing and seeking to connect with forest beings.

Attachment and Sexual Intimacy

According to the literature, the fearful-avoidant attachment style is developed in response to trauma (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) and specifically, childhood sexual abuse is correlated with attachment issues (Heiman & Heard-Davison, 2004). Given my early and ongoing childhood trauma, it is not surprising that I would be characterized as someone with a fearful-avoidant attachment style. Compared to those with either anxious, avoidant, or secure attachment styles, the fearful-avoidant style is rare (only 10-15%), and research suggests that the relational and psychological risks associated with this style are high; specifically, “pronounced difficulties in the regulation of interpersonal emotions” (Favez & Tissot, 2019, p. 510). However, despite the high risks and complications, there is a gap in the literature regarding this attachment combination (Favez & Tissot, 2019).

Favez and Tissot (2019) were the first to explore sexual functioning in those with fearful avoidant attachment styles. Favez and Tissot (2019) found that women with a fearful-avoidant attachment style are more likely to engage in sex even when they do not want to or do not feel desire. However, while this has historically been true for me, I made conscious efforts to engage in a more empowered way and was able to be successful. Favez and Tissot (2019) also found that women with fearful-avoidant attachment had more sexual partners than women with other attachment styles. Contrary to those findings, this was not my experience, and it is not reflective of my life experience. Favez and Tissot (2019) concluded that higher numbers of sexual partners and sexual compliance in those with a fearful-avoidant attachment style could be attributed to the anxious attachment (fearful) aspect of the style, specifically the intense desire for closeness and

inability to refuse sexual advances for fear of rejection. Further, they found that the push and pull of the fearful-avoidant style led to increased sexual activity to elicit closeness followed by breaking the bond with one's partner once closeness was achieved. In my case, while I have experienced similar struggles, my fear of being alone has historically outweighed my desire to sever bonds. Given this, aside from the last year experimenting with ENM, I have been a serial monogamist since the age of 16 with very few gaps in between long-term relationships and, adding in my refusal to engage in casual sex, I have had few opportunities to explore multiple sexual partners.

Self-Objectification, Sexual Function, and Identity

Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory was foundational in how I interpreted my psychological experience regarding body dissatisfaction and preoccupation. In 1997, Fredrickson and Roberts presented objectification theory as a framework to explain the female experience and related mental health consequences of the sexual objectification of the female body. The theory posits that the sexual objectification of women and girls leads them to equate their value with how they can be used by others and thus develop an identity dependent upon and representative of the external view (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Sexual objectification becomes internalized, leading to self-objectification (continuous monitoring of external appearance, body shame, and anxiety) and a variety of psychological disorders (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Since the objectification theory framework was put forth, there has been extensive research into its relevance in understanding the psychology of women (see Moradi and Yu-Ping, 2008).

Aligned with research on the aging female body, my struggle with self-objectification and habitual body monitoring affected my health and wellbeing (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997;

Grippio & Hill, 2008; McKinley, 2006; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Specifically, my experience mirrored Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) conclusion that self-objectification resulted in increased shame, anxiety, and depression as well as disordered eating and sexual functioning. What made my interpersonal experience significantly different than in past relationships was that in order to remain in integrity with myself and this process, instead of looking externally for affirmation of my attractiveness I turned to myself and sought to establish that my value was far more than my physical appearance. This would calm me for a bit, but it never silenced the internal critic. Lev-Ari et al.'s (2014) survey research on attachment style, body image and satisfaction, drive for thinness, and social comparisons with two hundred and eighty-three women aged 18–42 years, found that especially in women with anxious attachment, social comparisons negatively impact women's body satisfaction and increase a drive to be thin. The process of comparing myself to others and finding myself wanting was limited by the restrictions on socializing during Covid, which helped alleviate an additional arena of anxiety and shame.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggest that self-objectification is a strategy women develop to improve their quality of life, as it helps them prepare for how they will be treated by others. Aligned with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, if I did not approve of my appearance when M was soon to arrive, I would become anxious, feel shame, and then feverishly attempt to improve my appearance out of fear that otherwise he would be disinterested or even reject me (Calogero et al., 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This anxiety would soon settle, but then it would reappear when sexual intimacy was proposed. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) note that “significant portions of women's conscious attention can often be usurped by images of how their bodies appear” (p. 180), and that was consistently my experience, especially in the midst of physical intimacy, when my experience would be constantly interrupted by

concerns about my body. Further, aligned with Fredricks and Roberts (1997) findings that self-objectification interferes with an awareness of internal body state and experience of arousal, I would often seem to not be able to identify what I physically wanted or needed.

While these findings are reflective of the literature on self-objectification, these experiences are also aligned with literature on childhood sexual abuse. Specifically, Bass and Davis's (2008) influential manifesto *The courage to heal: a guide for women survivors of child sexual abuse* maps out almost verbatim the struggles I experienced regarding disassociation, anxiety, shame, self-esteem, interpersonal issues related to trust and related sexual dysfunction. While this book was not based on a research study, the workbook has been tested and found to be highly reliable (see Brandyberry & MacNair-Semands, 1998). Given this, while self-objectification is a theory that underlies much of my experience, I cannot rule out my childhood sexual abuse as being a critical aspect of my sexual dysfunction, fractured identity, and potential for healing.

Self-Objectification and Aging

Clark (2001) conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 women above the age of 61 and explored the struggle aging women have related to their bodies and sense of self; she noted how women experience their bodies as both a mask and a prison, and that was very true for me. Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) measured the consequences of self-objectification and body dissatisfaction in 322 women from 20 to 84 years and found that objectification theory was a valid construct given that self-objectification was at the core of disordered eating decreasing with age. Given aging is the antithesis of the idealized idea of beauty being synonymous with thinness and youth, they argued, as women age, their body image will worsen (Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). Thus, body dissatisfaction (and associated shame) remains stable across the lifespan, yet

Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) also found that self-objectification, anxiety about appearance, body monitoring, and eating disorders decreases with age given the presumption that there is less importance placed on physical appearance as one ages. Aligned with these finding, my eating disorder is much less pervasive than when I was younger, but in contrast to these findings, my experience of body dissatisfaction fluctuated across time, and my self- objectification and habitual body monitoring felt as strong and central to my experience as it ever was. Perhaps my status as an unmarried woman competing with other women in the dating scene can be the mediating factor between Tiggemann and Lynch's (2001) findings that women place less importance on their bodies as they age.

Reel et al. (2008) found that women continued to enact self-objectifying behaviors throughout their lifespans due to adherence to societal expectations of beauty. Similarly, I continued private self-monitoring, exercise, and limiting food intake. At the same time, aligned with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) formulation, these experiences were dependent upon context. I was more accepting and loving towards my body when I was alone, or even when being viewed by potential suitors. Then, consistent with other aspects of my self-esteem, I had full confidence in myself until I started to attach to my partner. Specifically, once I started to have sex with M, my body monitoring and self-objectification returned in full force when preparing to see him, and often when I was with him, regardless of how clear it was that he desired me. This experience of increased self-objectification despite clear appreciation by my partner contradicts with Tiggemann and Lynch's (2001) finding that the importance of physical appearance decreases with age due to "a wider range of experience with men of varying ages who have a wider range of tastes" (p. 249).

In addition, when I was able to maintain self-love and esteem, once I felt powerful, I

would move to shame and anxiety and again experience myself as an object (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). My sense of personal value would slip into alignment with what I looked like, and I would obsess about if I was young or sexy enough to keep his attention. Woodward (1999) suggested that given the societal narrative that beauty is meant for the young, “for many of us, an archaic but tenacious private shame haunts our vision” (p. 4), the shame associated with my aging appearance shows up every time I look in the mirror and thus is evident in every video I made of myself.

Feminism, Self-Objectification, and Identity

According to Rubin et al. (2004), it is a radical act for young women to reject societal ideals on beauty especially given the central importance these ideals are on identity. Alternately, for older women, Grippo and Hill (2008) suggest that some body dissatisfaction in older women who embrace feminist ideals may be mediated by no longer viewing their bodies as objects, presumably based on no longer catching the male gaze, but on the whole, looking at 138 heterosexual European American women aged 40-82, such ideals did not positively influence self-objectification, habitual body monitoring, and self-esteem. Still, in both of these examples, it is put upon the woman to face oppressive norms externally and internally to define themselves as acceptable regardless of appearance. For me, going through this process resulted in high levels of anxiety and a tenacious internal monologue of shame.

Regardless of my feminist viewpoint and commitment to actively stripping away these oppressive norms, I continued to objectify myself. It was almost as if a switch would be flipped and I would go from feeling confident, secure in my value, and powerful, to feeling preoccupied with my appearance, timid, and dependent. Tiggemann and Stevens (1999) found that strong feminist ideals reduced concern about weight; however, that is contrary to my experience.

Rather, aligned with Grippo and Hill (2008), my experience supported the conclusion that regardless of my feminist ideals, as an older woman, I continued to be ruled by self-objectification and dissatisfied with my body.

Krekula (2007) highlights how the experience of aging differs according to gender; specifically, she suggests women dislike and feel shame in relation to aging given that their value is equated with her appearance, while a man's value is related to his accomplishments and therefore they are more accepting of aging. That finding was consistent with my experience as I applied this double standard to myself. At the same time, Krekula (2007) found that older women do not feel that appearance is as important as it had been, and, as argued above, while that was true for me logically, even with a clear feminist standpoint, I could not stop myself from feeling and acting as if it was my defining feature. Finally, also aligned with Krekula's (2007) findings, there were times when I did experience my aging body as "a source of pride and pleasure" and of aging as a "process of development and gaining experiences" (p. 166). I cannot imagine younger Rachel enjoying her body as I have been, nor can I imagine her being able to ignore societal norms to take such seemingly risky steps relationally.

Implications

It is impossible at this stage in my journey to separate feminist implications from general implications; they seem to me to be one and the same. I see a variety of implications for the field of couple and family therapy, current and future feminists, individuals, and people in all manner of relationships. I do think that these implications can be interchangeable in some ways (e.g., therapists can share or facilitate interventions and can try them on their own; individuals or couples/polycules can try them independently, etc.). In addition, given the lack of research on the experience of fearful-avoidant attachment, I believe this account can give therapists, family,

friends, and partners insight into the lived experience of fearful-avoidant attachment.

Specifically, these implications can build empathy and perhaps understanding of the repetitive and confounding nature of the wounded self's response to interpersonal interactions and attachment threats.

Accordingly, I felt it was important to revisit my initial clinical concerns. I embarked on this work because I was concerned that Johnson's (2012) EFT may be contributing to women's oppression due to reinforcing oppressive norms such as caregiving, softening, and emotional dependency. In the end, I still believe that if we are not conscious of issues of identity and self-attachment, practicing EFT may indeed be reinforcing oppressive norms. Similarly, Goldman and Greenberg (2013) note that in their version of Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT-C) "the sharing of vulnerabilities can be challenging in environments that support traditional gender role frameworks wherein males more typically have more "gendered" power" (p. 65), and it is therefore important to integrate addressing issues of dominance, power, hierarchy, and identity when practicing EFT.

To ensure you are working to combat oppression versus add to it, I believe therapists must assess for identity cohesion, self-attachment, and self-objectification before encouraging people to build a secure bond with other or pathologizing and diagnosing clients who exhibit behavior that can be attributed to a fractured identity, internalized oppressive norms, or self-objectification. Given the wily nature of the mind, I also suggest that you use experimentation versus just analysis to assist yourself and your clients to:

- Prioritize the wise-self (versus the ego or defensive self)
- Explore how female socialization, i.e. caregiving as core identity, value and worth, by design, leads to dependency, martyrdom, and victimhood
- Address fears around lack of identity outside of the caregiver construct

- Identify if/how projections, oppressive norms, or self-objectification is affecting their ability to form a cohesive identity and healthy relationships
- Use self-love and acceptance to move from victimhood (projection, judgement, blame, internalized oppression) to empowerment (discernment, right action, and personal responsibility) without shame or blame

In this section I provide some guidance to consider when seeking to help experiment with the concepts above, e.g., prioritizing oneself, building a cohesive identity, centering one's experience on oneself, and becoming trustworthy and confident as a whole person with whom they can build secure attachment. In addition, I offer some questions and ideas I used to experiment with my struggles to overcome oppressive norms and navigate conscious relationships. There is no singular female identity, and I want to be clear that I am not implying that my discoveries are a universal experience or that I speak for all women. Accordingly, the tools and resources that I share may not be directly appropriate or useful for all women or for those who love, work with, or raise them.

Doing the Work. While I came at this work from a feminist lens, my hope is that the processes and, at times, content in this work can help anyone with a marginalized identity seek to centralize and empower themselves to challenge internalized oppressive norms, structures, attributes, and beliefs. As part of that process, I hope people are then able, and seek to, develop their own cohesive identity, with rules and beliefs that are reflective of their wholeness (temperament before oppressive norms aligned with non-human animals,) and that serve them. This work is about freedom and expansion and thus is uncomfortable; letting go of the happiness goal and embracing discomfort, disruption, and personal responsibility is critical to success.

Ego and internalized oppressive norms. I found that socialization and related ego and defenses are wily and tenacious! The following is my experience, I encourage you to try this on and see if it may be reflective of your experience as well: If I have a strong negative reaction to

an idea and automatically think that I am actually empowered and in fact *not* a victim of internalized oppressive norms and *not contributing* to the oppression of myself and others due to those norms, chances are my ego is leading my actions and thoughts. Often my ego tries to convince me that it is my wise, true nature, and given my life experience, it tries to tell me I am bad, need to protect myself, live in scarcity, and so on. *When my ego is in charge, I am living according to my socialization and defenses and in that state, being self-centered and self-serving could be destructive and dangerous.* Figure 4: When is it Safe to be Self-centered and Self-serving? in Appendix A maps this out. I want to be very clear; I do not recommend that anyone focus on being selfish, self-centered, self-serving without continuously testing that they are making decisions based on their wise-self versus their ego/defenses.

When led by ego/defenses, I am likely to be in denial and feel victimized, ashamed, anxious, depressed, overly confident, entitled, or any other number of emotional states that do not serve me and thus, do not serve society and the earth. This is fundamentally different than being led by my wise-self. For instance, if my defenses imply that people around me are playing the victim or living in scarcity, it's likely that *I feel* victimized or that I am living in scarcity. When I project these things onto others, I become powerless (the victim) and I am likely to be rigid, have dysfunctional relationships, and live with anxiety, depression, shame, and blame, etc. When my wise-self is clear that I *am* being victimized (by self or other) or living in scarcity, I have a choice on if I want to take right action, learn to accept something outside my control, or sit in the mess. In essence, when I own my projections I am empowered. I can find the strength necessary to find meaning, identify my contributions to the pain I am in, and practice the bravery to take right action and free myself, even if I can only do so in my mind. One method I used to “outsmart” my ego was to continuously ask myself what evidence, outside of “common

knowledge” or “personal experience” I had to support my beliefs. This process of continuing to dig deeper below my defenses, assumptions and automatic reactions helped me explore ways my behavior or thoughts were based on my socialization versus of my own creation.

Regardless of the “why” and what was driving my defensive behavior, I also tested to see if my behaviors and thoughts were *directly* serving me. If they were only indirectly serving me, I assessed if what I was doing was manipulative, indirect (passive aggressive, martyr, etc.) or otherwise convoluted. In most cases where things were *not* directly serving me, I found there was some maneuvering involved to ultimately serve me, and this was not only inefficient and a barrier to intimacy, it also seemed to be lacking integrity. For instance, when I was sacrificing myself, thinking I was doing what I “had to” to “take care of people” and also to be “good” or “lovable”, I learned that I was not only exhausting and martyring myself, I was also building resentment, feeling victimized by the system, and acting in ways that were disempowering. From this state, I could not love myself or others. My ego accepted all of this pain and alienation to avoid accepting my limitations, setting boundaries, “disappointing” people, or taking personal responsibility for my decisions! *Can you think of any ways you may be running from taking responsibility for your life or actions? Where are you projecting and where can you consider right action?*

The more power and privilege I have, the more I imagine denial is at play. If you explore your social position and find that you have more power or privilege than others, perhaps consider ways your privilege protects you from experiencing oppressive norms, while also contributing to the oppression of others through pitying, dismissing, or minimizing experiences different from your own. Then, instead of falling into a guilt/shame spiral or trying to “help” others (which either way keeps the attention on you) allow yourself to accept that you cannot imagine what it is

like to be oppressed the way others are and consider how you can lessen your contribution to that oppression. If your ego then comes in with justifications, entitlement, or scarcity, you know what to do!

Self of the supervisor and therapist. I cannot stress enough that if you are thinking about applying any of these ideas in your work with therapists or clients you *must go through this process with yourself first*. And I do mean process, because I believe deep self-love and acceptance is a way of life; and if you do not *directly* love your *whole* self, I am not sure there is an end to understanding how your defenses and internalized oppressive norms may be sabotaging you or others. I fully believed that I loved myself and had done the work I needed to do to not contribute to the oppression of myself or others. I could not have been more wrong. As a supervisor and therapist, I understand I am in a position of power. I understand that I can help heal wounds and can also do great harm, especially when I believe I “know” how to “help” others and get great satisfaction from doing so.

When you're in your power the burden is great, not in your power a whole lot at stake --Owl

There is little more dangerous than a self-sacrificing therapist or supervisor.

- *If you are teaching self-care and not practicing, you are not living in alignment with yourself, this issue of integrity breeds distrust and cognitive dissonance in yourself and your clients/supervisees.*
- *If you are not prioritizing yourself, your needs, and living in the first person, and instead are prioritizing others and sacrificing yourself in the process, chances are you are contributing to oppressing yourself and others.*
- *If you believe you are fully self-aware, not projecting, and able to be objective with your clients, you are likely lying to yourself.*

- *If you believe you have done your work already, chances are you have not, as this work is ongoing.*
- *If you are still confident that you can help others without doing this work because you understand how oppressive norms and structures are affecting you and your clients, chances are you are acting in ways that are oppressive.*
- *If you believe that Knowing and Understanding are the same as Being and Doing through Right Action, consider undertaking your own journey to witness, support, and love yourself before “helping” others.*
- *If reading this makes you angry and you are coming up with all of the reasons you are indeed not contributing to oppressing yourself or others, you may want to look at that reaction too.*

Nature and Spirituality

The critical developmental process of prioritizing and centering my experience on myself and challenging oppressive norms was empowering and terrifying. If you are someone without a secure bond to a person seeking to embark on a similar process, I encourage you to not embark on this type of work alone. Before pursuing this work, I encourage you to find a consistent, reliable source of calm, acceptance, and inspiration for ways to act and feel to support growth and healing. Nature and spirit animals were critical to my success in identity formation and healing attachment wounds. Without nature and Source, it would have been impossible for me to peel back as many layers as I did; still there are many more layers to go!

My experience relying on nature and animals has widespread implications. One, I do not need to rely on human role models to figure out ways to behave and engage in the world; if like me, you have trust issues with humans, this can be a huge relief. Two, animals provide lessons

outside of the social construct, which feels especially essential given the toxicity of much of our socialization, and I do not need to go far to engage with them. Even living in a city one can witness and find meaning in animals, insects, plants, the solar system, and trees.

Related to healing attachment wounds, although I did a lot of experimenting in relationship with M, I found that I could work on these wounds without having to depend on, or find, another person or relationship to engage with. I argue that single people, or people without family, who are overlooked in attachment theory debates should be included. If you have to be in a relationship to work on healing attachment wounds, this is one more stress on people who may already feel isolated or just do not have interest in being in an intimate relationship. When I am looking for love, the pressure to find and maintain a relationship is not only painful, it also can lead to shame, desperation, and bad decision making.

For people with intimate partners, I illustrated some of the many potentially disruptive dynamics that undermined my relationships when I depended on my partner(s) to meet attachment needs. Alternatively, I argue that if you can get what you need from nature or spirit animals (or spiritual beings of your choice), you reduce dependency and thus dysfunctional dynamics. Finally, both nature (in some form) and spirit animals are always available, and given this work can be very triggering, I found that knowing I have and can utilize 24/7 support is critical for self-care.

Cohesive Identity

Developing and maintaining a clear identity required being aligned with my true self, regardless of the social construct, and maintaining that identity through my interactions. Prioritizing and centralizing that self—living from my own lens, my own experience—knowing and asserting what I needed and wanted even when it disappointed or hurt people, are other

essential components. Given that identities are not stagnant (Watson, 2005), my findings are not a solution, but rather an ongoing process, which can lead to an improvement in your attachment to yourself and to others, at least it did with me.

One way I found my way into identity was through experimentation and experience without judgment, regardless of how other people may judge, and then processing what comes up, self-soothing, and experimenting some more. A cohesive identity required accepting suppressed beliefs and aspects of myself—versus demonizing, pathologizing, projecting, or being indifferent to them. Embracing and working with these suppressed parts also helped me overcome some of my socialization and insecurity. Getting to these suppressed beliefs was a critical step in my process of experimenting, then processing what I found. Specifically, through art, exploration, and movement; engaged and aware sexual intimacy; taking myself seriously, inquiring, listening, responding to, and soothing myself, and walking into fear, I found and explored meaning regarding my shadow parts. Essentially, I explored Being while building a relationship between thinking, feeling, and doing.

Doing this work had several steps I repeated, and it was confusing sometimes to hold onto myself when I would get scared or lost. Those steps were curiosity, self-soothing, engaging, and identifying oppressed or shadow parts. Figure 5: Simplified Identity Development Experimental Process (Appendix A) is a visual aid that may help identify where one is in the process of developing a cohesive identity. Understanding that the experience is part of a system can be helpful for emotional grounding.

Using a relationship and CFT lens, interpersonal engagement was necessary to get clearer on my identity, wants, and needs, but that also required other attachments to provide relief from anxiety and help avoid dependency. I do not think I could have tolerated my dissertation

experience if I did not have the woods, the animals, and my budding relationship with myself to help me gather courage, confidence, and options for my identity before testing it out with others. This process is folded into the self-soothing bubble. This is where feminism comes in again, because if women are socialized to understand their identity is external and based on how people view them (or specifically view their bodies) as well as their willingness to care for others, it is oppressive to suggest that they depend upon their partner for soothing, happiness, and fulfillment.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore shamanic healing (Harner, 1980), creativity (Bickel, 2005; Chilton & Leavy, 2014), and forest healing such as eco-psychology (Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995) and forest bathing (Li, 2018) etc. as a whole, it is important to also acknowledge journeying and, aligned with ABR, using art (painting, music, poetry) to uncover hidden knowledge and aspects of self was a critical step in my process. I would highly recommend people consider such alternate methods of identity creation beyond insight and attachment to thinking.

Self-prioritization Versus Caretaking/Pleasing Others

As a therapist I have been known to try to help women, especially mothers, embrace the importance of “putting the oxygen mask on yourself first.” It is very rare that a woman will do this, let alone a mother, even when they are nearing collapse. My hypotheses are one, if your identity is dependent upon helping others and suppressing your own qualities and experience, it is too terrifying to engage in self-care if you do not even know who your self is; and two, the female socialization regarding value, worth, and identity being tied up in caregiving by design leads to dependency, martyrdom, and victimhood. Expanding on these ideas, I believe the process of ignoring your needs, exhausting yourself for others, and perhaps noticing that you are

depleted but feel responsible (who else is going to do it, it's your job after all!) is a trap that ultimately leads to depression and anxiety. Collapsing into "mental illness," (depression/anxiety) which has its own stigma, is somehow more acceptable than being a woman that prioritizes her needs and provides self-care. It is essential for women to recognize that despite socialization, their value is not just in what they do for others (DeVault, 1994) or what they look like (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Before becoming schooled in feminist thought, issues of identity and self-esteem were often invisible to me as a therapist.

Some things to ask to begin a discussion on self-care and prioritization:

Table 1

Self-Care and Prioritization Assessment Questions

Self-Care and Prioritization Assessment Questions
When was the last time you prioritized yourself—what you wanted, not just what you needed, before seeing to others? If it has been a long time, what have the repercussions been?
Do you assume caretaking others is your job? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is your caretaking helping others? Enabling them? Creating dependence? ● Is your caretaking helping you? Creating distraction or resentment? ● Were you asked to caretake or do you assume you <i>should</i> do it? ● What do you fear may happen if you stopped? Is what you fear definitely true? This is a great place for experimentation.
Do you spend your time thinking about others more than yourself? If so, is that necessary? Is it serving you? What happens if you start thinking about yourself? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen to your self-talk, is it loving, supportive, kind, curious?
Are you owning and accepting your own struggles or less than attractive qualities? Are you focusing on judging others?
How much time do you spend directly pursuing your own goals in life, relationships, family? How does this compare with how much time you spend supporting and encouraging others?

If you are considering having children, why is that? What do you hope to gain from that experience? How will this decision affect your identity, relationships, life goals, time, and attention?

Centering on a Loving Accepting Self

The implications of shifting consciousness from others to self seems widespread for individuals, partnerships, and for therapists that work with individuals and couples. I have summarized my related experience as a case study to help ground this idea.

During my work I discovered it was not enough to prioritize myself (as in put myself first), I had to actively and intentionally center my experience on myself when engaging interpersonally, and especially when pursuing intimacy. Although I believe I am able to center my experience by living in the first person when I am alone, my thinking would often shift towards others, and when I was with others, I was not even aware that I became decentered, shifting my lens to others and their needs. One barrier to centering my experience on myself was my lack of identity cohesion due to a lifetime of suppressing or rejecting socially undesirable qualities.

The process of identifying and reclaiming rejected aspects of myself was painful and also extraordinary. I uncovered my traumas, avoidant attachment, denial, and projections. I learned that I use my mind to distract myself from my experience and each time I do, I oppress myself by comparing or seeking to force myself to conform to an external standard that does not serve me. Then every time I (automatically) center my experience on other in an attempt to (indirectly) obtain affirmation, validation, proof of my value, or to continue to reject my oppressed parts through projection, I lose a little bit of my power; I start to self-objectify and thus become dependent on other to witness and validate me. This creates extensive interpersonal dysfunction,

and the more I do this, the more lost and fractured I become.

I often see aspects of this dynamic play out with couples. For both individuals and couples, I believe centering on self can help with power struggles, enmeshment and sexual advocacy, empowerment and taking personal responsibility. Here are some questions and ideas to consider when switching to living life in the first person:

Table 2

Experimenting with Centering Experience on Yourself

Experimenting with Centering Experience on Yourself
<p>Centering one's experience requires a separate identity from others. Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are my thoughts, feelings, values, ideas, philosophies related to what I am experiencing, discussing, reading about, exploring? • How does it feel to me? • What do I want from this exchange, experience, situation etc.? • What would best serve me now and in the future as far as actions, behavior, etc.?
<p>When you first center your experience on yourself, you may find there is little to work with; say yes to whatever comes up and then experiment. Be patient with yourself, you may have been living for and through others, it may take time to know wants and needs.</p>
<p>Consider long- and short-term objectives when you take steps to center yourself that serve you. That is, keep in mind the things that might serve you in the moment may not ultimately be healthy or good for you and may continue to support an oppressive dynamic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example, if it would literally best serve you (keep you safe from threats) to keep your mouth shut, to play dumb, to flirt, to demure or defer to someone else, is that really a situation you want to be in? How can you change, or if necessary, remove yourself from the situation?

Secure Attachment to Self: Assessment and Potential Tools

Two of my three attachment figures were either always (in the case of the woods) or seemingly at times (in the case of M) indifferent to me. Is it possible to securely attach to a being

who does not even know or acknowledge that you exist? How can that be safe?

Using an EFT lens, there are a variety of challenges to attachment theory when considering my attachment to the woods and with M. However, what I have learned is that I do not need my partner to prioritize, witness, or be emotionally engaged with me. I believe that is because of my growing attachment to myself and Source. I get what I need from me, and I get what I want from my partner and others in my life.

This self-attachment alleviates some of the emotional and behavioral gymnastics I have used in the past to try to ensure I felt a “balance” in love and commitment with a partner. It also helps me stop behaving in ways that undermine my power. For instance, in my marriage, seeking to ensure cohesion and harmony resulted in the suppression of my whole self and desire, especially when I experienced or worried that my wants or aspects of my personality may be rejected or misaligned with my partner’s. This led to feeling stifled, helpless, and victimized. Not being able to tolerate these feelings led to my projecting them onto my partner. Once I did this, I was even more helpless, because no matter how hard I tried, I could not change him or get him to change. In essence, each time I disowned aspects of myself and projected them onto others, I lost the power to influence and shape my experience and entered into a power struggle. Once there, I found limited options including: (a) accept the situation; (b) leave the relationship; or (c) waste a lot of energy trying to cajole, encourage, or force your partner to change, failing, and then leaving. I typically choose c., and if I had owned my feelings from the start, I likely would have come to the same conclusion (misaligned needs/wants) without the years of frustration and agony for both of us.

For a simplified visual that centralizes building a secure bond with oneself versus one’s partner as the main relational influence, please see Figure 6: Simplified Comparison of Healthy

Self-attachment vs. Dysfunctional Attachment to Other in Appendix A. This figure maps out what I have witnessed as a couples therapist and experienced in relationships when focusing on other versus myself, and highlights my hypothesis around EFT potentially adding to the oppression of women given women's socialization regarding focusing on and caring for others (attachment issues) and self-objectification (identity and self-esteem issues). The last three sections in blue could happen individually or in tandem and similarly can connect to any number of identified causes and effects. This visual could be used as an assessment or educational tool for centralizing experience and shifting focus. I should also note that the power struggle when focusing on other and self could be influenced by attachment style.

In EFT (emotionally focused couples therapy), based on my discoveries, I recommend that when doing an attachment assessment, therapists include some of the below questions in their assessment to ensure work on developing a secure bond with one's partner(s) is not contributing to oppression. This assessment could be a good place to start for the layperson as well. Consider the following for attachment to self.

Table 3

Self-Attachment Assessment

Self-Attachment Assessment
Where do you go for soothing?
What does that process look like?
Where do you go when you're scared?
What's it like when you're scared, what happens?

Do you trust yourself?

- What contributes to feeling that you do or don't?
- What can you do to ensure you are trustworthy?
- What barriers do you feel are in the way and what can you do to remove them?

Do you feel you are able to give yourself what you need to live a secure and fulfilling life? If not, who do you depend on and how does that relationship work?

Do you sacrifice or suppress parts of yourself in an effort to ensure you are accepted, loved, and secure?

Self-Therapy or Self-Parenting. One of the most effective interventions I used for self-soothing as well as living in integrity was self-therapy or self-parenting. The process is simple: inquire into, listen to, and explore whatever you are feeling or thinking out loud, without judgement or shame, to truly see, understand, and accept yourself. When I was at my best, it was not about fixing or understanding why, it was about providing myself with what I longed for from others: true connection, steadfastness, intimacy, unconditional love, attention, encouragement, admiration, candidness, emotional engagement, and acceptance.

I do self-therapy or self-parenting looking in the mirror, videotaping myself, in the car, in the woods, or whenever I have some time to really listen to and connect with myself. In my dictations, I sometimes called this process “mirror work” because I found the most effective way to truly see and connect with myself, as well as hold myself accountable, was when I was looking at myself. This was because I could not hide. I have an expressive face, and I know all my “tells.” I also can tune into my inner dialogue, and when I am looking at myself, it slows me down enough to witness and share whatever it is I am thinking.

Saying things out loud helps to clear away the repetitive scripts that keep me distanced from my experience. It also helps me externalize and uncover how different parts of myself think and feel and any associated anxiety fueled inner dialogue. Here are some tips according to what I

found to be the most effective experience. You may find that different things work for you.

Table 4

Self-Therapy/ Self-Parenting Guidelines

Self-Therapy/ Self-Parenting Guidelines
1. Make sure you inquire and listen, versus give yourself pep talks or reassurance.
2. Say yes to it all, whatever comes up: when you say yes, you aren't resisting and thus are allowing for flow versus getting caught in arguments, anxiety, or evidence gathering.
3. There are no rules other than to see, acknowledge and treat yourself with compassion.
4. Meet yourself with acceptance, curiosity, and nonjudgement.
5. Treat yourself how you treat others you admire, love and respect, truly listening and connecting.
6. Remember that you are the only person who is never going to leave you, treat yourself accordingly.

Conscious Relationships with Self and Other

At a high level, my traditional process of entering a relationship was assessing and choosing a person, developing person specific expectations along with societal expectations, and then creating a related fantasy and basing my feelings on whether or not my partner was able to live up to what I assumed they “should” be doing or what they “promised” during our “courtship.” In my new model, the intention is to defy automatic expectations and instead create an understanding that we aim to actively choose ourselves and each other, staying in and working with reality. Basically, one is a passive relationship based on the “security” of making a

decision and sticking with it. The other is a dynamic relationship with the “security” of being empowered; able to negotiate and if not, being able to make conscious decisions. In other words, when you are conscious and candid (to the extent that feels comfortable), everyone gets to choose how they want to respond; that is, process what is, then decide if you want to accept what is, compromise, make changes for yourself, or leave in compassion. I see alignment between this section and the self-attachment chart above.

I have mapped out a chart showing details on two specific relationship models based on my experience. I see these models as equally valid, but my bias related to my *personal choice* of conscious relationship is likely clear. Also, my definition of “traditional” is reflective of my culture and socialization and is not meant to be universal.

Table 5

Comparing Traditional to Conscious Relationships

Domains	Traditional Relationship	Conscious Relationship
Development	Linear: courtship; assessing viability of relationship and compatibility	Ongoing: courtship, assessing compatibility
Goal	Life partner: relational commitment, long term monogamy, sexual intimacy, marriage, children, helpmate, harmony	Expansion: commitment to exploring wants, and increasing flexibility, creativity, self-knowledge, intimacy
Engagement	Once chosen, maintenance, homeostasis, engagement according to traditional gender roles	Actively choosing, communicating, and exploring developing selves with openness; engagement according to negotiated desires
Expectations	Established and assumed: based on societal rules (faithful, prioritizing other, etc.) and relationship patterns and dynamics; punitive and indirect (unspoken rules)	Evolving and openly discussed: based on agreements, negotiated, and renegotiated aligned with personal and interpersonal developments; curious and open (evolving agreements)

Trust	Based on history, following rules and promises, caring for other, and meeting expectations; avoid hurting each other	Based on ongoing action, respecting boundaries, and self-care and transparency (integrity); avoid sacrificing self
Security	Allegiance to union, roles, societal, cultural, and relationship rules, harmony: bonding, assumed monogamy, and loyalty to other; faithfulness/allegiance (until death do us part); dependency, consistency, minimal disruption/change intending to lead to sense of permanence	Allegiance to self, communication, growth, and compassion: self-attachment; freedom with continued negotiation of agreements intending to lead to greater flexibility, self-growth, acceptance, anticipating and embracing change in self and other
Intimacy	More or less follows linear path based on established expectations	Experimentation, self-awareness and advocacy, curiosity
Potential Challenges	Enmeshment, codependency, suppressed desire and voice, covert/passive aggressive behavior: infidelity, lying, criticism, denial; pursuer/distancer dynamic; avoidance, jealousy, possessiveness	Increased anxiety and need for self-soothing and community, over-processing leading to decreased spontaneity and exhaustion; avoidance of intimacy, jealousy, disengagement, hubris, using others

This is not meant to be a “lone ranger” model of relationship; rather, it is one where focus starts on oneself. This makes connection possible and sought out because of desire for companionship, intimacy, and expansion. In this model, each person is responsible for ongoing intra- and inter- personal integrity and honesty with themselves and each other about who they are, what they need, limits and boundaries, and expectations.

Being in a conscious relationship means owning your own experience, feelings, expectations, needs and wants, and then communicating and deciding with your partner if you share compatibility, goals, and are both able and willing to try to meet each other from your best self. This is an active, conscious relationship based on equal influence; it may be in defiance of rigid, assigned roles and societal or cultural assumptions and expectations.

The level, amount, and focus of communication will vary depending on the relationship

and personalities of people involved. For instance, my beliefs around what is a healthy and desirable level of communication in my intimate relationships have shifted. I am seeing for myself that I need to *communicate my anxiety less* and *have less dependency on my partner for self-regulation*. For people without the attachment wounds and anxiety I have, this may look very different. I encourage people to explore what is a comfortable and effective amount of communication individually and with their partner(s) or with a trained couples' therapist.

To help ground these concepts, I have mapped out key concepts regarding conscious relationships and associated questions for self-inquiry I use to help me stay in integrity.

Table 6

Conscious Relationship Concepts to Consider

Conscious Relationship Concepts to Consider
Everything changes, nothing is always, no one is to blame, experiment! Then expect and embrace change and loss as well as love and joy
Work on being flexible and open while also knowing and affirming your boundaries and limits.
A mirror, curiosity, compassion, and personal integrity are your best tools to ensure healthy relationships.
Logic is different from emotions—you may think that you can handle something when in reality, emotionally you can't. Recognize when this happens, communicate, and adjust if needed, forgive yourself and your partner for being human. There is no shame in learning.
Self-soothing is important; as is centralizing your experience on yourself.
Any need that you can meet on your own, I suggest you do it; relationships based on want are much more flexible and freeing than those based on need.

You will disappoint your partner(s) and you will be disappointed; you will unintentionally hurt your partner(s) and you will unintentionally be hurt. Discussing these things from a place of compassion, parts, and personal responsibility can help navigate subsequent emotions:

Avoid shame and blame, if they come up, acknowledge, and meet (yours or partner's) hurt or disappointment with compassion, validate and empathize

Some communication tools for sharing hurt:

- Normally I feel X but due to Y, part of me feels Z
- When Y happened, I interpreted it as Q, what was your intention?
- Self-assessment: I find myself feeling R, where is that coming from? Is this all the time or sometimes? What is my role in this dynamic? Where am I benefiting from it?

It is important to explore and seek to understand your motivations; when and if they are selfish, defended, selfish, or immature, acknowledge that and decide what to do with this information; if these motivations are affecting others, share that information and live with the consequences.

It is important that you do things and act in ways that serve you if you don't want to develop resentment and passive aggressive behaviors.

- If you hate, love, or otherwise respond in an extreme way to someone's actions, personality, etc. likely it's about you (personally, historically, etc.) and they are an opportunity for you to work through these feelings.
- If you are seeking to, or regularly undermine, criticize, dismiss, or otherwise diminish your partner or yourself, something is wrong and needs to be addressed.
- Self-sacrifice, selflessness, passive obedience or agreeableness, dominance, surety, and rigidity are likely not virtues in relationships, if you find yourself looking for or celebrating these qualities in yourself or someone else, you may want to look closely at your motivations.
- Fantasy is not reality, and reality is not fantasy; there is no truth, everything is fantasy, the only reality is your experience and that reality is likely different from your partners' accept that and you will be free.

The questions I use to stay in conscious integrity seem like the antithesis of feminine programming, and exploring them can be uncomfortable, especially if, like me, you think yourself a feminist or a person of power. Given this, I suggest paying special attention to reactions to these questions including anger, immediate denial, or dismissals.

Table 7

Empowered and Conscious Relationship Self-Assessment

Empowered and Conscious Relationship Self-Assessment
Am I treating myself how I want to be treated vs. treating others how I want to be treated?
<p>Am I <i>truly</i> claiming and owning my power?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I looking for others to save or empower me? Acting or feeling like a victim? • Am I putting my empowered self first, that is, living in my power so I do not resent or act passive aggressively? • Am I being who I need to be to take the best care of myself?
Am I meeting all of my needs that I can meet? Does it serve me to seek to get my needs fulfilled by [partner/potential partner/other]? What are the bargains and repercussions of this, are they clear, and am I willing to pay them?
Does what I feel I want, or what I feel compelled to do or say, serve me?
Are my interactions (general, sexual, emotional) centered on my experience? That is, am I living in the first person?
<p>Are the rules I am following <i>my</i> rules? Are they my family's? Society's?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which rules do and which rules do not serve me? • Am I willing and able to tolerate the potential repercussions of claiming my own power and following my own rules? If not, can I accept the repercussions of continuing to follow rules that disempower me, do not serve me, and/or are not aligned with my true self?
<p>Am I living in, and treating myself and others from a place of integrity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I being fair and open regarding negotiating and bargaining? • When I sacrifice, am I doing it freely, not to get something back? • Am I practicing self-honesty, self-care, and self-compassion first before compassion and care to others?
<p>Am I Being—living in alignment with my full self, owning (personal responsibility) and accepting (self-love) all my bits so I don't project or reject myself and others?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When and how am I open and curious, and then discerning? • When and how am I closed and judgmental in defense? • When and how are these ways of Being serving me?
What outcome am I looking for, will that outcome serve me, and will my thoughts, behaviors, beliefs result in the outcome I seek?

Am I sure that what I believe is “true”? Meaning, am I making assumptions? Are my interpretations facts? Do I see and understand the difference between my assumptions and intent? Can I be curious and open enough to explore these things with myself and/or my partner? If not, what would serve me?

I find that navigating the emotional experience in such relationships can seem chaotic and circular, especially when integrating interpersonal experimentation. Figure 7 in Appendix A, *Developing Interpersonal Trust and Confidence* is a streamlined representation of my experience building trust through interpersonal experimentation. My process could start at any point in the cycle, and I often feel or think similar or contradictory thoughts or feelings simultaneously. In this representation, I cycle through being grounded and curious, and from there I locate suppressed voices or shadow parts. After exploring those ideas intellectually, I feel empowered and motivated, with this increased confidence I then engage interpersonally. Based on what I experience through that engagement, I feel love and joy, typically followed by despair and fear, and then, after either or both feeling states, I go into a thought or analysis spiral. From there I self-soothe, to settle back into curiosity, and it starts all over again. Naming where I am in the spiral calms me; it reminds me that something always happens next. I imagine understanding that emotions are not infinite or linear may help others ground themselves as well.

Ethical Non-Monogamy. I struggled with ENM due to my situation (new relationship), attachment style, partners, and emotional bandwidth. Logically, it felt like the answer to all my relationship challenges. Emotionally, it was prohibitively difficult for me to navigate. I still believe that it is a legitimate relationship choice that can be healthy and fulfilling, and I may seek to explore it again. In general, through ENM I learned that clarifying context, expectations, candidness, honesty, and trust was critical through all stages. I also learned that navigating any hurt required discussing which parts of ourselves were concerned and what we were hoping to

get from each other in response to related attachment anxiety.

In the end, I learned my anxiety was too high for me to be honest with myself, and I could not ethically engage with multiple partners. I regret not realizing that before inadvertently hurting others through pursuing ENM. There are many resources on polyamory/ENM (Easton and Hardy, 2017; Fern, 2020) and further exploration is outside the bounds of this dissertation. However, I will share the questions I used to assess and navigate my ethics and decisions regarding pursuing ENM:

Table 8

Ethical Non-Monogamy Exploratory Checklist

Ethical Non- Monogamy Exploratory Checklist
Why are you doing this? Be clear on your intention regarding pursuing another relationship ... is it to expand? Alleviate anxiety? Meet a need? Sex? Emotional intimacy? Entertainment? And is everyone on the same page?
Who is part of this relationship: are you using this relationship for your own expansion? Your “primary” relationship's expansion? Will you use your actions/dates to titillate your current partner or is this just for you and totally separate? Is everyone on board on these parameters including the new person?
How much info will you share and when? How much information can you be asked about and when? Do you have a “safe word” in case your partner is sharing too much information for your comfort?
What are the rules, boundaries, expectations for everyone involved? Does everyone have a say and are all in agreement (including new partner)? Are you all aware of when, how, how much to share and with whom? When is it ok to ask for information?
What do you do when emotion is different from logic? Meaning, if you feel ok logically, what do you do if you get an unexpected emotional reaction? Can you share it with your partner? When? What process will you use to explore it?
When you are with another partner, how does communication work? No contact? Check in? Other? Is everyone clear on boundaries and expectations? Are you all in agreement?

What about before there is contact or relationship, when should you share what you are doing regarding looking for another partner? When you are randomly on a dating app? When you swipe? When you contact someone? When you decide on a date? etc.
<p>How will you process difficulties (i.e., jealousy or possessiveness) that come up? Here is a model to consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask if a good time, if it isn't ask or offer an alternative • Set context (i.e., part of me feels anxious, possessive, angry, etc.) • Set expectations (i.e., what I'd like from you is soothing, just to listen, problem solving, action, etc.) • Be curious, validate and empathize • If it's yours, where is it coming from? • If it's other, most likely it's not about you even if you are being implicated, try to uncover the root cause
How do you define your relationship with each other, friends, colleagues, family? etc.

Fundamentally, practicing ENM seems to be about being sure that everyone is on the same page about status, boundaries, expectations, negotiation, and reconciliation, while also being clear on how much partners want to be involved with other relationships and comfort level for all. If you are candid, negotiating and seeking to be ethical all around, it comes down to personal responsibility and ensuring that everyone involved is doing the same.

Owning Your Desire. When it comes to desire, I have found myself existing on a spectrum between feeling desperate for and not wanting any sexual attention or engagement. There are reasons for and implications of all points on that spectrum. My experience was that there was much pleasure to be found when entering into areas of discomfort and my hypothesis is that this is due to women being socialized to deny themselves pleasure or to even consider that they are entitled to pleasure. Once I started embracing walking into my discomfort, I discovered that I was consistently denying myself pleasure in a variety of convoluted ways that affected me and my relationships. Some assessment questions to explore on your own, or if appropriate, with your partner:

Table 9

Exploring Desire

Exploring Desire
<p>Are you getting your needs met sexually? Do you know what they are? Do you ever think about what would please you sexually?</p>
<p>How does your partner respond when you seek sexual closeness? How do they respond when you advocate for yourself?</p>
<p>When you do have sex, do you feel it is for you? Does it ever feel like a(nother) situation where you are meeting someone else's needs?</p>
<p>If you can identify what you want, do you genuinely feel comfortable asking for it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you did advocate for yourself, would your partner gladly provide? What stops you from testing related assumptions? • If they provide, will you get to focus on you or will you feel compelled to make sure you like it or act like you do to make sure they stay confident?
<p>Are ever you unsure if you want to have sex or want to have the kind of sex your partner wants? If so, what do you do with these concerns?</p>
<p>Do you worry about hurting your partner or feel that if you do upset them, you have to help them feel better about themselves? Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever feel you have to sacrifice your body to be used by other? Or that you need to please your partner at the expense of yourself? That it is your job to provide access to your body? • Where did these ideas originate and are they your rules? • Have you ever discussed these feelings with your partner?
<p>If you know what you want, do you have access to your desire? If yes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any oppressive norms holding you back from accepting or communicating your desires (e.g., women who like sex are sluts)? • Do you fear your feedback may be a threat to your partner's ego or their excitement? • Do you worry if you share what you want, you may have to caretake (a bruised ego) or make sure you enjoy what you asked for (e.g., act the porn star so your partner can feel good about what they are providing)?
<p>Are you concerned that the things you desire may not be socially acceptable? While I view this as mostly specific to fantasy, as long as what you are doing sexually is done between two consenting adults, this idea can be expanded to embrace actual interactions.</p>
<p>Do you worry about your sexual attractiveness i.e., worry about your thighs, your toenails, your orgasm face, your cellulite, your wrinkles? If this holds you back, what would you like to do with these worries?</p>

Do you worry that you may want things that your partner is not interested in? Have you explored your desire with your partner? Have you asked about theirs?

- Are you concerned about advocating for yourself sexually?
- If so, where do these ideas come from and are they definitely true in this situation?
- Is the concern from you or from past experiences with your partner?
- Do you feel comfortable continuing to have sex without feeling like you have a voice?

Experimenting with Self-Advocacy Regarding Intimacy. If you struggle to advocate for yourself, you are not alone. Were you ever explicitly taught, and then experienced it was okay, to say “no” to what you do not want, let alone know and then advocate for what you do want? Ask yourself and then explore with your partner the following questions before engaging in sexual intimacy:

Table 10

Setting Intimacy Goals and Expectations

Setting Intimacy Goals and Expectations
What does sexual intimacy mean to you (penetrative sex? oral sex? kissing?) and do you and your partner(s) have a shared language and understanding on meaning?
What is the goal of intimacy: orgasm? Do you want to feel connected? Is it exercise, is it for pleasure solely, for escape, for orgasm? Is it something you want to give your partner and/or something you want just for yourself? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you want to get from this experience? Your partner? ● Are your goals aligned? If not, can you negotiate?
How will you or your partner know if you are enjoying sexual intimacy? Do you feel comfortable giving feedback if you’re not enjoying what your partner is doing? If not, how can you remedy that?

Conscious Kink: Roleplay, Fantasy, Self-Advocacy, and Attachment. Another area that I explored was the issue of taboo fantasies and sexual role play. This has a variety of implications for individuals, couples, and therapy. There are extensive resources (Taormino,

2012) available for people who are interested in exploring this topic further that are outside the bounds of this dissertation, but I did want to highlight a few things to consider:

Like me, you may find that your desire conflicts with your values or feminist identity, and perhaps this is uncomfortable or embarrassing to you. Similarly, Fowles (2008) wrote an article exploring the personal, feminist, political and societal barriers to discussing and accepting the idea of a sexually submissive woman relinquishing her authority to a dominant man. Fowles (2008) concluded that acknowledging the choice to seek consensual non-consent, in fact to feel empowered by this choice, is simply “too scary”, especially for feminists, to accept, and ultimately is an example of a personal and societal prejudice towards explicit sexual power-exchange. When feeling shame about and trying to suppress my desires, I experienced pain and distance from my excitement. Alternately, when I felt accepting of and able to explore these taboo desires because they: a. made perfect sense given my life experience, and b. were part of my healing journey (self-acceptance), they brought me joy. Given this, and given that I found a partner that was willing to explore with me, I do not see how judgement or suppression of my desires serves me. This does bring up the issue of partner choice and relationship type, so it is perhaps something to consider when seeking conscious relationships. Sexual fantasy has a great influence on intimate relationships and there are a variety of advantages and disadvantages to sharing them (Ziegler et al., 2016), these connections can be explored when assessing issues of desire with your partner(s) or client couples.

Although I logically knew and understood that my desires were tied up in past trauma and attachment wounds, I do not believe I protected myself adequately. This led to a lot of anxiety and pain. Given this, I would recommend that anyone who is interested in exploring taboo sexual desire consider the following ideas:

Table 11***Safely Exploring Taboo Sexual Desires***

Safely Exploring Taboo Sexual Desires
Clearly map out with potential partners what each of you are looking for, what it means to you both, what the rules are, and what your safe words are. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice using your safe word so you feel comfortable when/if you need to use it
Ensure you feel secure in your relationship, choose someone trustworthy and who knows and understands the potential repercussions of breaking agreed upon boundaries and agreements. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If your partner does not follow agreed upon rules, consider if that is ultimately serving you and take action to remedy the situation
Ensure you feel comfortable with and practice safe and supportive communication, self-advocacy, and self-care (e.g., see above)
Understand the potential psychological complications of combining issues of attachment with sexual intimacy, especially if you have experienced any sexual trauma (and if you are a woman or are in the LGBTQIA+ community, you almost certainly have). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider alternate or additional support and resources to help you heal past trauma
A general rule is, if you are scared to set limits, advocate for yourself, or communicate what works and doesn't work for you, it's risky to engage in psychological play.

Limitations

Limitations related to ABR, FST, and FA by design will result in biases and blind spots due to highlighting a singular experience, aligned with my context, privileges, and perspective. In addition, my training as a therapist, and the context of this work (e.g., global pandemic, recent divorce, new relationship, etc.) greatly influenced my experience; it is unclear what my experience might be if any one of those circumstances were different and unclear how training and context would affect someone else doing this work.

Through my various experiments and work on self-acceptance, I did discover many unexpected biases and blind spots, such as projections and ways I am untrustworthy; still, there

are certainly more to be uncovered. While this is a limitation when trying to generalize my specific experience, in some cases, the process I used can be further tested for more generalized consumption. In other cases, embarking on a similar journey may be met with more barriers for some people depending on context and culture. For instance, in a culture that openly insists on the obedience of women, taking such steps towards independence and self-centeredness could result in a variety of negative or even dangerous consequences, if it was even possible.

For women who have dependent children, especially single mothers, there would be additional limitations related to time, cultural expectations, health and well-being of children, and personal bandwidth to deal with the consequences of and invest time, effort, and energy into putting their needs and wants first. At the same time, centering their experience on themselves is one process that could be undertaken with minimal disruption. However; I continue to strongly believe that disruption is critical for the health and well-being of individuals and society. Specifically, given that *not* putting one's needs and wants first seems to be the cause of grief and pain for all involved, I strongly encourage all women to consider ways to prioritize themselves. *If you are saying to yourself that prioritizing yourself is impossible, consider this: men do it, don't they? Given this, I urge women to accept that it is not only acceptable, it is indeed possible and essential. If you stop sacrificing yourself, the system will have to adjust, it is just a matter of being prepared to accept the consequences of this decision. As you are considering if the consequences are worth it, please consider the consequences of not changing (e.g., indirectly seeking to get needs met leads to dysfunctional relationships, resentment, martyrdom, inability to experience intimacy, guilt, illness, shame, victimhood, dependency, low self-esteem, etc.) and make your decision from there.*

Aligned with Hughes (2002) perspective on FST, my findings are clearly subjective, based on my experience, reality, and truth. As a white, pansexual, 48-year-old, childfree, relationship therapist and doctoral candidate I am a person with enormous privilege, having benefited not only from the economic and ethnic lottery, but also from being schooled in charm and gifted with attractiveness and intelligence. These and other privileges led to a successful career and, due to associated power and acceptance that many others have not experienced, a wide variety of freedoms including limited responsibilities to family or career and some freedom from societal pressures to conform. I therefore went into this experiment with the luxury of time and prior experience *consciously* refusing to conform to societal pressures. Other women without such privileges or practice could have a significantly more difficult time identifying and confronting areas of oppression or suppressed identities, finding partners to experiment with or energy to commit to self-reflection. At the same time, other people may have more secure attachment styles, or fewer or different pressures and experiences based on their context, resulting in greater freedoms, self-esteem, and bravery. Also, my status in society, the Covid 19 pandemic and my location, a mostly progressive, predominantly white, New England village with minimal travel did limit my exposure and thus reaction to a wider variety of experiences and external reactions. It also provided me with easy access to nature that other people may not have.

Given extensive childhood and sexual trauma, I did indeed confront a variety of defenses and false identities established as a means to protect myself, which I was concerned would be a limitation. At this stage in the process, I can see that there are more fears and barriers to exploring my full identity, but each day of practice brings me closer. Again, the process, versus the particular experiences may be most relevant to the widest population. ABR, another limited

and subjective process, was meant to help expose some hidden aspects of my identity, and I feel writing poetry, music, creating my dissertation movie, and talking out loud to myself (i.e., self-therapy sessions) were most effective in mitigating that limitation.

Finally, I also had initially considered that being deep in the process of witnessing my everyday actions and reactions related to self-prioritization could limit the impact of my experience or my creativity due to performative behavior or preconceived notions. I do not think this was a significant limitation. In fact, I think it was the process of being so self-focused that provided me with more freedom, confidence and thus an expanded experience.

Future Research

As noted, there is little research on the experience of and interpersonal process when working with fearful-avoidant attachment. Given the psychological and interpersonal struggles associated with this style of attachment, more research into understanding and working with individuals, families, and couples affected by this experience is warranted. Furthermore, looking at how attachment affects sexual functioning and identity, and developing and testing associated interventions, would contribute greatly to the literature, individual and relational healing, and the practice of therapy.

Given my social positioning, the implications of my process applied to others is unclear. Ethically and for generalizability, a deeper dive into the implications of this work for people in varying social and power positions is necessary. Specifically, it is critical that people from diverse backgrounds and from both privileged and marginalized identities attempt to undertake work on self-prioritization, conscious relationships, and confronting oppressive norms before considering applying these ideas to a larger population.

Research on the seemingly dependent processes of securely attaching to the self and

building a more cohesive identity feels pressing, especially to help address the ways that women continue to be oppressed in society, therapy, and relationships. More research on the effect of oppressive norms on women's capacity to feel empowered and able to prioritize and center their lives on their experience versus focusing on caring for others would also be an important angle to explore. Similarly, the ways that self-objectification affects sexual experience, pleasure, and advocacy feels like a critical area of study. Future studies should also explore the association between self-attachment and identity among women and seek to understand how decisions around having children impact the association between self-attachment and identity among women.

The effects of self-objectification on identity, empowerment, self-esteem, and related interventions also seem critical. Providing related information to therapists to help identify and address issues of social justice in therapy would be enormously beneficial. Doing this research has helped me as a couples therapist identify issues I never would have seen before, especially around feminist issues and oppressive interpersonal dynamics. There is a need for more literature for therapists and graduate students in training related to how these insidious issues may show up with clients, with some interventions on how to unpack and address. The field of study and practice would also greatly benefit from more research focused on EFT and identity, especially related to women.

From an autoethnographical perspective, future research could explore the outcome of continued work on Being. Potential research questions may include:

- 1) Does a focus on Being lead to the ability to consistently live and love consciously?
- 2) Can self-attachment heal the effects of fearful-avoidant attachment on mental and relational health?

In addition to the present study, further studies that focus on diverse women's experiences and the process of women centering and prioritizing themselves and their experiences would be beneficial. Engaging in these types of studies could advance the field of couple and family therapy through a deeper understanding of the psychology of women and identification of interventions that can improve mental and relational health.

Conclusion

Before embarking on this research, working as a couples therapist, and mirrored in my own experience, I noticed that focusing on building a secure bond with one's partner, the goal of my theory of therapy, was not resulting in expected outcomes and may have been contributing to negative outcomes such as enmeshment, decreased sexual desire, decreased self-advocacy, and codependency. Upon exploring literature on objectification theory, I wondered if building a secure bond with a partner neglected to consider societal effects on women's identity and thus was potentially reinforcing oppressive norms. Research on attachment, middle-age childfree identity, and related intra- and/ interpersonal relationships neglected to address the experience or implications of self-attachment and development of a cohesive identity on individual experience and relational health. To fill this gap, I embarked upon a countercultural experiment to build a secure attachment to myself, instead of depending on my partner to meet my emotional needs. In this experiment I prioritized myself above all else, confronted oppressive norms, and witnessed what happened.

My findings called into question foundational knowledge and assumptions, personal values, and therapeutic theories, goals, and interventions. I learned it is not enough to prioritize myself, I have to be fully self-centered, that is, center my experience on myself, when engaging interpersonally, and especially when pursuing intimacy. I also learned to have a cohesive identity,

and develop a secure attachment, I need to uncover and reclaim parts of myself I have rejected due to socialization. Finally, I discovered that Being—acting in self-serving ways, and using intuition and discernment based on lessons from animals and nature—instead of depending on my analytical mind to “understand” my experience, is a process that leads to an expanded and cohesive sense of self and a shedding of oppressive societal norms. In the short term these three shifts can significantly increase anxiety, yet ultimately it is leading to increased empowerment, desire, bravery, curiosity, creativity, and love and thus improved mental health and relationships.

In my clearest moments, I now believe I am a being who is here to Be. Upon learning about Being, I understand that my greatest, and perhaps only power is in true acceptance, non-attachment, and engaged surrender. The forest, experimentation, and focused centering and self-prioritization help me, through bravery and relationship, clarify and learn to accept my (shifting) identity and act in alignment with my Being, in ways that serve me. Where that takes me, I do not know. I do know that when I fall, the forest catches me, so I am much more able to let go and Be my way into my identity and purpose as it unfolds.

As I continue to be emotionally engaged with myself, I can prioritize and center my experience from the first person. From this position I can be reliable, available, and responsive to my needs, and as I continue to work on fully committing to myself, I intend to securely attach to a real, cohesive person of integrity: me.

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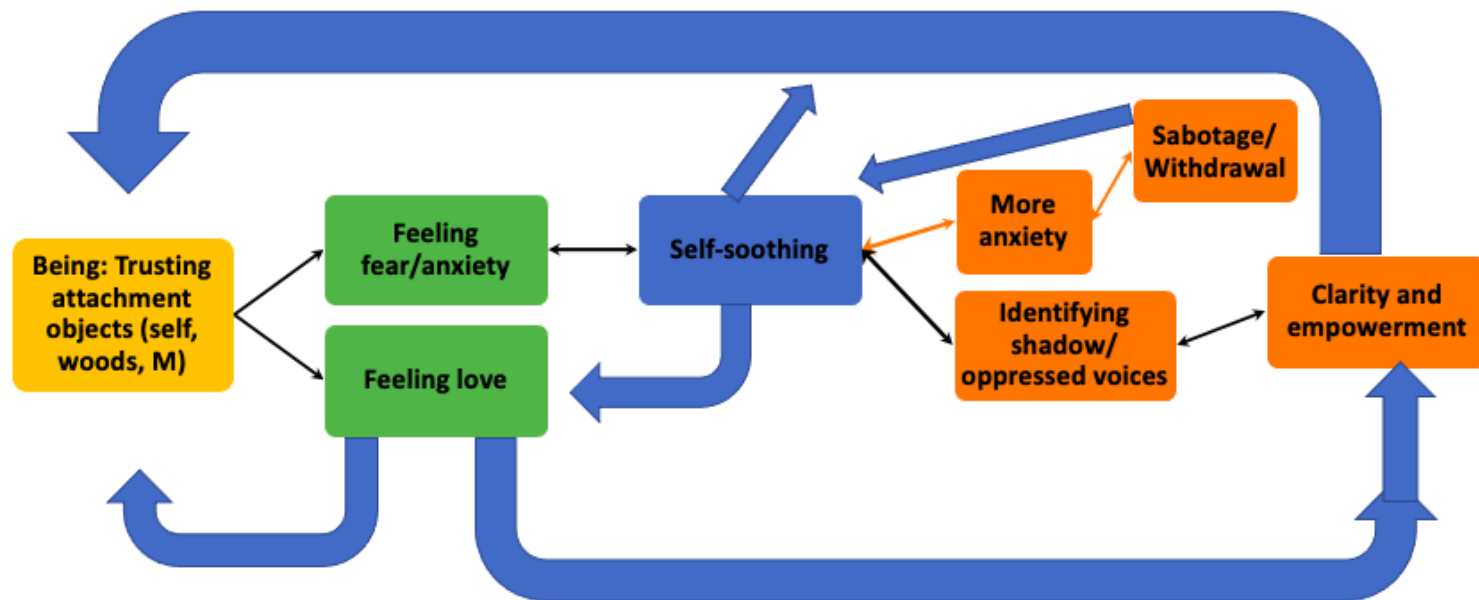
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Appendix A – Figures

Figure 1



Identity Development and Self-Attachment Process—Emotional Response/Experience

Figure 2

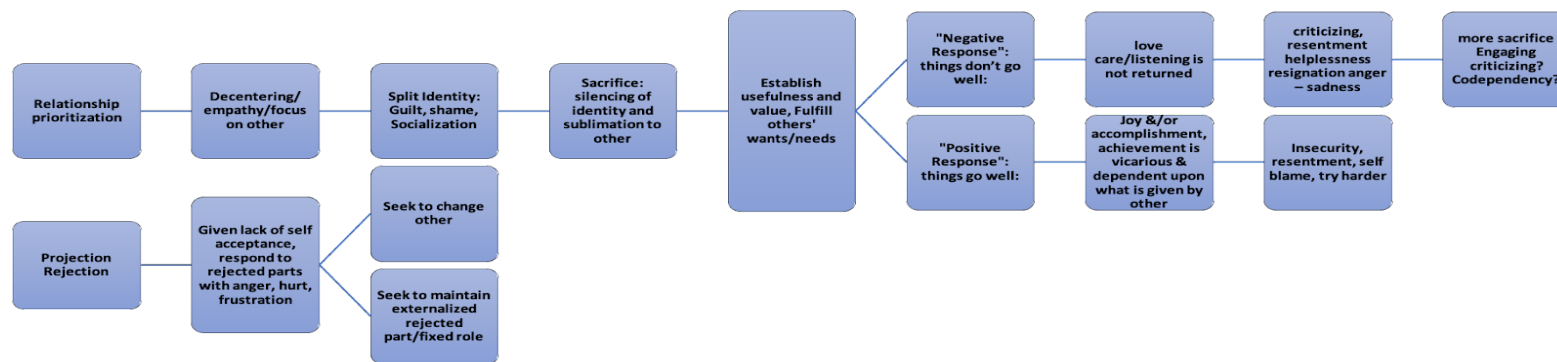
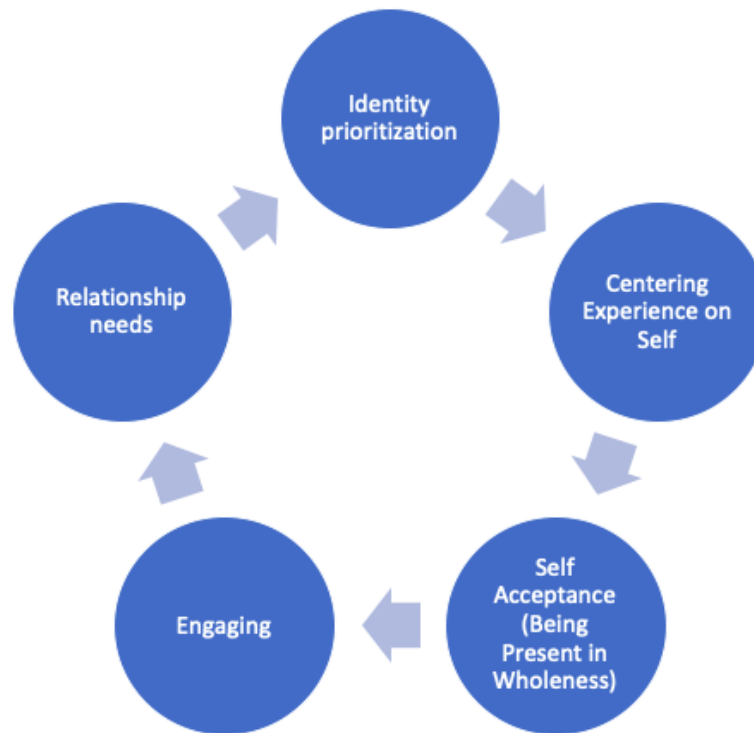
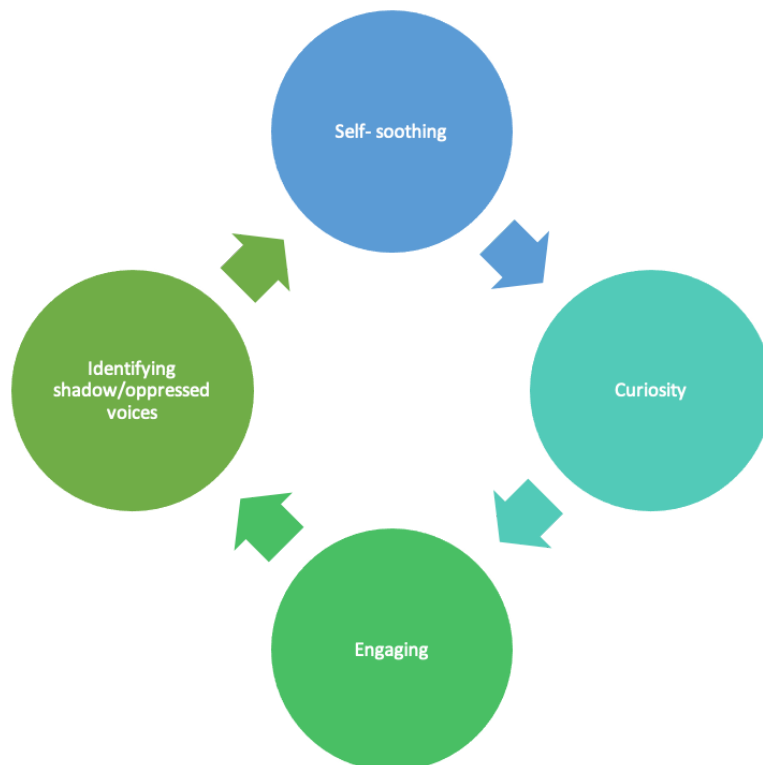
*Prior Interpersonal Engagement Process*

Figure 3

New Interpersonal Engagement Process

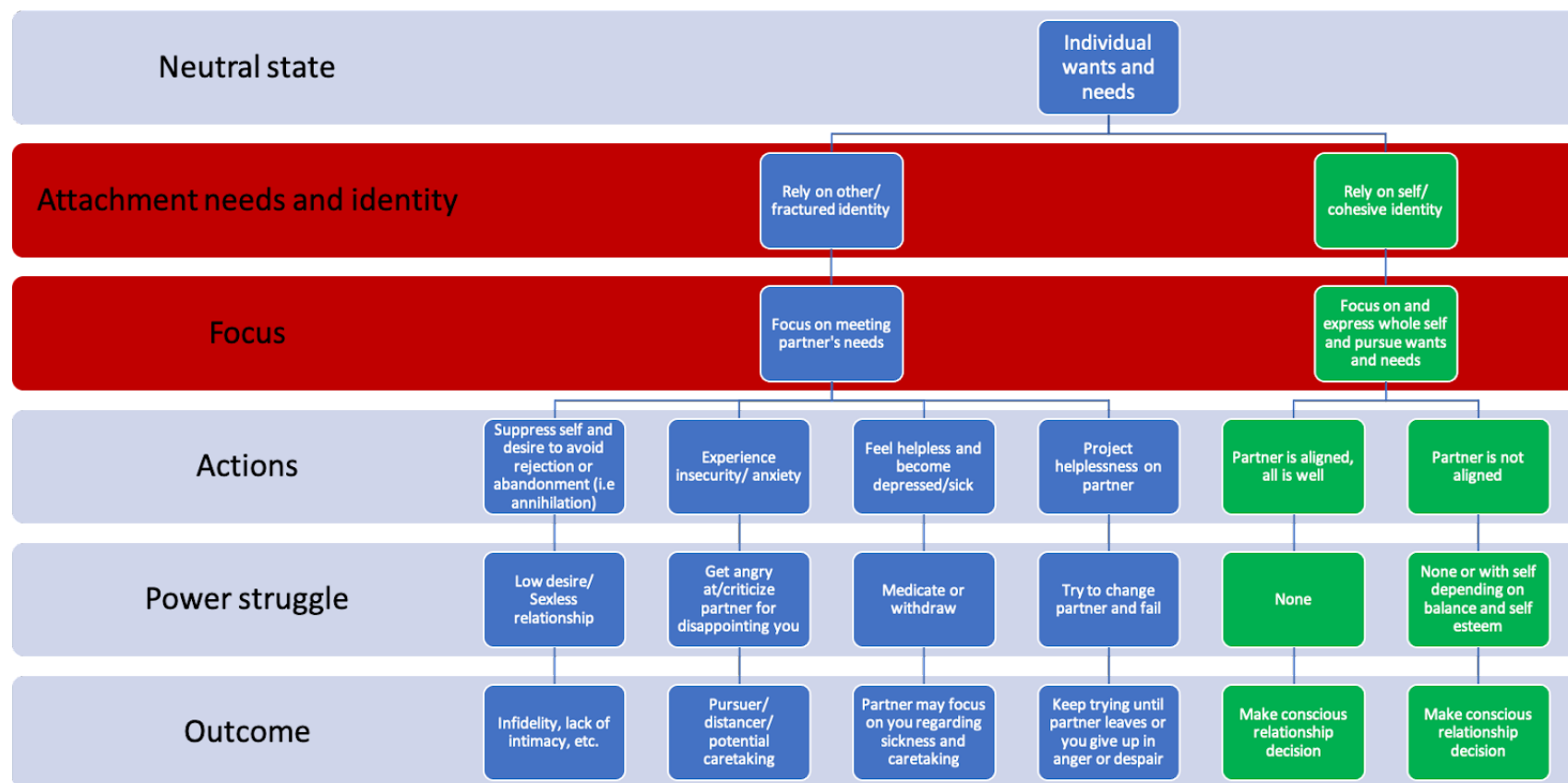
Figure 4

When is it safe to be self-centered and self-serving?

Figure 5

Simplified Identity Development Experimental Process

Figure 6



Simplified Comparison of Healthy Self-Attachment vs. Dysfunctional Attachment to Other

Figure 7

Developing Interpersonal Trust and Confidence

Appendix B – Tables

Table 1

Self-Care and Prioritization Assessment Questions

Self-Care and Prioritization Assessment Questions
When was the last time you prioritized yourself—what you wanted, not just what you needed, before seeing to others? If it has been a long time, what have the repercussions been?
<p>Do you assume caretaking others is your job?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is your caretaking helping others? Enabling them? Creating dependence? ● Is your caretaking helping you? Creating distraction, dependence, or resentment? ● Were you asked to caretake or do you assume you <i>should</i> do it? ● What do you fear may happen if you stopped? Is what you fear definitely true? <p style="padding-left: 40px;">This is a great place for experimentation.</p>
<p>Do you spend your time thinking about others more than yourself? If so, is that necessary? Is it serving you? What happens if you start thinking about yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen to your self-talk, is it loving, supportive, kind, curious?
Are you owning and accepting your own struggles or less than attractive qualities? Are you focusing on judging others?
How much time do you spend directly pursuing your own goals in life, relationships, family? How does this compare with how much time you spend supporting and encouraging others?
If you are considering having children, why is that? What do you hope to gain from that experience? How will this decision affect your identity, relationships, life goals, time and attention?

Table 2***Experimenting with Centering Experience on Yourself***

Experimenting with Centering Experience on Yourself
<p>Centering one's experience requires a separate identity from others. Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are my thoughts, feelings, values, ideas, philosophies related to what I am experiencing, discussing, reading about, exploring? ● How does it feel to me? ● What do I want from this exchange, experience, situation etc.? ● What would best serve me now and in the future as far as actions, behavior, etc.?
<p>When you first center your experience on yourself, you may find there is little to work with; say yes to whatever comes up and then experiment. Be patient with yourself, you may have been living for and through others, it may take time to know wants and needs.</p>
<p>Consider long and short-term objectives when you take steps to center yourself that serve you. That is, i.e., keep in mind, the things that might serve you in the moment may not ultimately be healthy or good for you and may continue to support an oppressive dynamic.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● For example, if it would literally best serve you (keep you safe from threats) to keep your mouth shut, to play dumb, to flirt, to demure or defer to someone else, is that really a situation you want to be in? How can you change, or if necessary, remove yourself from the situation?

Table 3***Self-Attachment Assessment***

Self-Attachment Assessment
Where do you go for soothing?
What does that process look like?
Where do you go when you're scared?
What's it like when you're scared, what happens?
Do you trust yourself? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What contributes to feeling that you do or don't? • What can you do to ensure you are trustworthy? • What barriers do you feel are in the way and what can you do to remove them?
Do you feel you are able to give yourself what you need to live a secure and fulfilling life? If not, who do you depend on and how does that relationship work?
Do you sacrifice or suppress parts of yourself in an effort to ensure you are accepted, loved, and secure?

Table 4***Self-Therapy/ Self-Parenting Guidelines***

Self-Therapy/ Self-Parenting Guidelines
1. Make sure you inquire and listen, versus give yourself pep talks or reassurance.
2. Say yes to it all, whatever comes up: when you say yes, you aren't resisting and thus are allowing for flow versus getting caught in arguments, anxiety, or evidence gathering.
3. There are no rules other than to see, acknowledge and treat yourself with compassion.
4. Meet yourself with acceptance, curiosity, and nonjudgement.
5. Treat yourself how you treat others you admire, love and respect, truly listening and connecting.
6. Remember that you are the only person who is never going to leave you, treat yourself accordingly.

Table 5***Comparing Traditional to Conscious Relationships***

	Traditional Relationship	Conscious Relationship
Development	Linear: courtship; assessing viability of relationship and compatibility	Ongoing: courtship, assessing compatibility
Goal	Life partner: relational commitment, long term monogamy, sexual intimacy, marriage, children, helpmate, harmony	Expansion: commitment to exploring wants, and increasing flexibility, creativity, self-knowledge, intimacy
Engagement	Once chosen, maintenance, homeostasis, engagement according to traditional gender roles	Actively choosing, communicating and exploring developing selves with openness; engagement according to negotiated desires
Expectations	Established and assumed: based on societal rules (faithful, prioritizing other, etc.) and relationship patterns and dynamics; punitive and indirect (unspoken rules)	Evolving and openly discussed: based on agreements, negotiated and renegotiated aligned with personal and interpersonal developments; curious and open (evolving agreements)
Trust	Based on history, following rules and promises, caring for other, and meeting expectations; avoid hurting each other	Based on ongoing action, respecting boundaries, and self-care and transparency (integrity); avoid sacrificing self
Security	Allegiance to union, roles, societal, cultural, and relationship rules, harmony: bonding, assumed monogamy, and loyalty to other; faithfulness/allegiance (until death do us part); dependency, consistency, minimal disruption/change intending to lead to sense of permanence	Allegiance to self, communication, growth, and compassion: self-attachment; freedom with continued negotiation of agreements intending to lead to greater flexibility, self-growth, acceptance, anticipating and embracing change in self and other
Intimacy	More or less follows linear path based on established expectations	Experimentation, self-awareness and advocacy, curiosity
Potential Challenges	Enmeshment, codependency, suppressed desire and voice, covert/passive aggressive behavior: infidelity, lying, criticism, denial;	Increased anxiety and need for self-soothing and community, over-processing leading to decreased spontaneity and exhaustion; avoidance

	pursuer/distancer dynamic; avoidance, jealousy, possessiveness	of intimacy, jealousy, disengagement, hubris, using others
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Table 6***Conscious Relationship Concepts to Consider***

Conscious Relationship Concepts to Consider	
9. Everything changes, nothing is always, no one is to blame, experiment!	
a. Then expect and embrace change and loss as well as love and joy	
b. Work on being flexible and open while also knowing and affirming your boundaries and limits.	
10. A mirror, curiosity, compassion, and personal integrity are your best tools to ensure healthy relationships.	
11. Logic is different from emotions—you may think that you can handle something when in reality, emotionally you can't. Recognize when this happens, communicate and adjust if needed, forgive yourself and your partner for being human. There is no shame in learning.	
12. Self-soothing is important; as is centralizing your experience on yourself.	
13. Any need that you can meet on your own, I suggest you do it; relationships based on want are much more flexible and freeing than those based on need.	
14. You will disappoint your partner(s) and you will be disappointed; you will unintentionally hurt your partner(s) and you will unintentionally be hurt. Discussing these things from a place of compassion, parts, and personal responsibility can help navigate subsequent emotions:	
a. Avoid shame and blame, if they come up, acknowledge and meet (yours or partner's) hurt or disappointment with compassion, validate and empathize	
b. Some communication tools for sharing hurt:	
i. Normally I feel X but due to Y, part of me feels Z	
ii. When Y happened, I interpreted it as Q, what was your intention?	
iii. Self-assessment: I find myself feeling R, where is that coming from? Is this all the time or sometimes? What is my role in this dynamic and where am I benefiting from it?	

15. It is important to explore and seek to understand your motivations; when and if they are selfish, defended, selfish, or immature, acknowledge that and decide what to do with this information; if these motivations are affecting others, share that information and live with the consequences.
16. It is important that you do things and act in ways that serve you if you don't want to develop resentment and passive aggressive behaviors.
17. If you hate, love, or otherwise respond in an extreme way to someone's actions, personality, etc. likely it's about you (personally, historically, etc.) and they are an opportunity for you to work through these feelings.
18. If you are seeking to, or regularly undermine, criticize, dismiss, or otherwise diminish your partner or yourself, something is wrong and needs to be addressed.
19. Self-sacrifice, selflessness, passive obedience or agreeableness, dominance, surety, and rigidity are likely not virtues in relationships, if you find yourself looking for or celebrating these qualities in yourself or someone else, you may want to look closely at your motivations.
20. Fantasy is not reality, and reality is not fantasy; there is no truth, everything is fantasy, the only reality is your experience and that reality is likely different from your partners' accept that and you will be free.

Table 7

Empowered and Conscious Relationship Self-Assessment

Empowered and Conscious Relationship Self-Assessment
Am I treating myself how I want to be treated vs. treating others how I want to be treated?
<p>Am I claiming and owning my power?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If not, am I looking for others to save or empower me? Acting or feeling like the victim? • If so, am I putting my empowered self first, that is, living in my power so I do not resent or act passive aggressively? • Am I being who I need to be to take the best care of myself?
Am I meeting all of my needs that I can meet? Does it serve me to seek to get my needs fulfilled by [partner/potential partner/other]? What are the bargains and repercussions of this, are they clear, and am I willing to pay them?
Does what I feel I want, or what I feel compelled to do or say, serve me?
Are my interactions (general, sexual, emotional) centered on my experience. That is, am I living in the first person?
<p>Are the rules I am following <i>my</i> rules? Are they my family's? Society's?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which rules do and which rules do not serve me? • Am I willing and able to tolerate the potential repercussions of claiming my own power and following my own rules? If not, can I accept the repercussions of continuing to follow rules that disempower me, do not serve me, and/or are not aligned with my true self?
<p>Am I living in, and treating myself and others from a place of integrity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Am I being fair and open regarding negotiating and bargaining? • When I sacrifice, am I doing it freely, not to get something back? • Am I practicing self-honesty, self-care, and self-compassion first before compassion and care to others?
<p>Am I Being—living in alignment with my full self, owning (personal responsibility) and accepting (self-love) all my bits so I don't project or reject myself and others?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When and how am I open and curious, and then discerning? • When and how am I closed and judgmental in defense?

- When and how are these ways of Being serving me?

What outcome am I looking for, will that outcome serve me, and will my thoughts, behaviors, beliefs result in the outcome I seek?

Am I sure that what I believe is “true”? Meaning, am I making assumptions? Are my interpretations facts? Do I see and understand the difference between my assumptions and intent? Can I be curious and open enough to explore these things with myself and/or my partner? If not, what would serve me?

Table 8***Ethical Non-Monogamy Exploratory Checklist***

Ethical Non- Monogamy Exploratory Checklist
1. Why are you doing this? Be clear on your intention regarding pursuing another relationship ... is it to expand? Alleviate anxiety? Meet a need? Sex? Emotional intimacy? Entertainment? And is everyone on the same page?
2. Who is part of this relationship: are you using this relationship for your own expansion? Your “primary” relationship's expansion? Will you use your actions/dates to titillate your current partner or is this just for you and totally separate? Is everyone on board on these parameters including the new person?
3. How much info will you share and when? How much information can you be asked about and when? Do you have a “safe word” in case your partner is sharing too much information for your comfort?
4. What are the rules, boundaries, expectations for everyone involved? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Does everyone have a say and are all in agreement (including new partner)? Are you all aware of when, how, how much to share and with whom? When is it ok to ask for information?
5. What do you do when emotion is different from logic? Meaning, if you feel ok logically, what do you do if you get an unexpected emotional reaction? Can you share it with your partner? When? What process will you use to explore it?
6. When you are with another partner, how does communication work? No contact? Check in? Other? Is everyone clear on boundaries and expectations? Are you all in agreement?
7. What about before there is contact or relationship, when should you share what you are doing regarding looking for another partner? When you are randomly on a dating app? When you swipe? When you contact someone? When you decide on a date? etc.

8. How will you process difficulties (i.e., jealousy or possessiveness) that come up?

Here is a model to consider:

- a. Ask if a good time, if it isn't ask or offer an alternative
 - b. Set context (i.e., part of me feels anxious, possessive, angry, etc.)
 - c. Set expectations (i.e., what I'd like from you is soothing, just to listen, problem solving, action, etc.)
 - d. Be curious, validate and empathize
 - e. If it's yours, where is it coming from?
 - f. If it's other, most likely it's not about you even if you are being implicated, try to uncover the root cause
9. How do you define your relationship with each other, friends, colleagues, family? etc.

Table 7***Exploring Desire***

Exploring Desire
<p>Are you getting your needs met sexually?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you know what they are? • Do you ever think about what would please you sexually?
<p>How does your partner respond when you seek sexual closeness? How do they respond when you advocate for yourself?</p>
<p>When you do have sex, do you feel it is for you? Does it ever feel like a(nother) situation where you are meeting someone else's needs?</p>
<p>If you can identify what you want, do you genuinely feel comfortable asking for it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you did advocate for yourself, would your partner gladly provide? What stops you from testing related assumptions? • If they provide, will you get to focus on you or will you feel compelled to make sure you like it or act like you do to make sure they stay confident?
<p>Are ever you unsure if you want to have sex or want to have the kind of sex your partner wants? If so, what do you do with these concerns?</p>
<p>Do you worry about hurting your partner or feel that if you do upset them, you have to help them feel better about themselves? Ask yourself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you ever feel you have to sacrifice your body to be used by other? Or that you need to please your partner at the expense of yourself? That it is your job to provide access to your body? • Where did these ideas originate and are they your rules? • Have you ever discussed these feelings with your partner?
<p>If you know what you want, do you have access to your desire? If yes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any oppressive norms holding you back from accepting or communicating your desires (e.g., women who like sex are sluts)? • Do you fear your feedback may be a threat to your partner's ego or their excitement? • Do you worry if you share what you want, you may have to caretake (a bruised ego) or make sure you enjoy what you asked for (e.g., act the porn star so your partner can feel good about what they are providing)?

Are you concerned that the things you desire may not be socially acceptable? While I view this as mostly specific to fantasy, as long as what you are doing sexually is done between two consenting adults, this idea can be expanded to embrace actual interactions.

Do you worry about your sexual attractiveness i.e., worry about your thighs, your toenails, your orgasm face, your cellulite, your wrinkles? If this holds you back, what would you like to do with these worries?

Do you worry that you may want things that your partner is not interested in? Have you explored your desire with your partner? Have you asked about theirs?

- Are you concerned about advocating for yourself sexually?
 - If so, where do these ideas come from and are they definitely true in this situation?
 - Is the concern from you or from past experiences with your partner?
- Do you feel comfortable continuing to have sex without feeling like you have a voice?

Table 8***Setting Intimacy Goals and Expectations***

Setting Intimacy Goals and Expectations
What does sexual intimacy mean to you (penetrative sex? oral sex? kissing?) and do you and your partner(s) have a shared language and understanding on meaning?
<p>What is the goal of intimacy: orgasm? Do you want to feel connected? Is it exercise, is it for pleasure solely, for escape, for orgasm? Is it something you want to give your partner and/or something you want just for yourself?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do you want to get from this experience? Your partner? ● Are your goals aligned? If not, can you negotiate?
How will you or your partner know if you are enjoying sexual intimacy? Do you feel comfortable giving feedback if you're not enjoying what your partner is doing? If not, how can you remedy that?

Table 9***Safely Exploring Taboo Sexual Desires***

Safely Exploring Taboo Sexual Desires
<p>Clearly map out with potential partners what each of you are looking for, what it means to you both, what the rules are, and what your safe words are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practice using your safe word so you feel comfortable when/if you need to use it
<p>Ensure you feel secure in your relationship, choose someone trustworthy and who knows and understands the potential repercussions of breaking agreed upon boundaries and agreements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If your partner does not follow agreed upon rules, consider if that is ultimately serving you and take action to remedy the situation
<p>Ensure you feel comfortable with and practice safe and supportive communication, self-advocacy and self-care (e.g., see above)</p>
<p>Understand the potential psychological complications of combining issues of attachment with sexual intimacy, especially if you have experienced any sexual trauma (and if you are a woman or are in the LGBTQIA+ community, you almost certainly have).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider alternate or additional support and resources to help you heal any past trauma
<p>A general rule is, if you are scared to set limits, advocate for yourself, or communicate what works and doesn't work for you, it's risky to engage in psychological play.</p>

Appendix C – Soundtrack, Companion Movie, Song Lyrics, Poem

Dissertation Soundtrack Made up of recorded walks in the woods as well as improvised guitar recordings created during data collection process.

Dissertation Companion Movie Includes photographs from Panthera hikes and social engagements, short videos to friends, original music, poetry, and self-therapy sessions

Little Leaf (Improv), 5/18/20

Little leaf, why you hide from me?
 In the trees, way out of reach
 Are you there or did I make this up?
 I'm not sure that I, know which way is down
 or should we find a way to figure all this out?
 or would we be just as lost, if we made a left or if we found a right?
 either way isn't the same?
 A mistake, is it not the time to try a different way?
 Let's get this straight, there is not one way, to find the other place
 it is just the same, this is not a race
 little leaf, you've got a lot to say
 it may not matter to some, but it means a lot to me
 and that's enough

Hiding (Improv), 5/11/19

you found a way inside my heart
 even though it was quiet
 you weren't distracted by noise,
 the way it gets inside

you weren't able to hold on
 to all the things you held
 you said it's fine, I don't need stuff
 but we know that's not so clear

you found the way inside the dark
 it was very dark
 But you brought some light

I wasn't sure that it was right
 I'm always thinking there's a way
 to judge these things but we know
 that's just how I hide

Look inside
I'm here, waiting for you
waving my arms and screaming "hey, come find me, I'm lost inside"

Pretending I'm open but
I'm trapped inside
No bears in sight
the birds they circle round
as if they have something to say
when we know they have lots to say
if only we'd listen
now's your chance

Dragon Released, 3/14/20

Messengers
turn eyes to me
drop these rocks
of you and me

overflow
power contained
I've been found and
I've been framed

Sounds to be roared and
space to be made
space to be seen
cracks to be saved
Better, then, mine

The Fool
twisted in sheets
I thought then, incomplete
I don't need your heat

Kitty cat scared
The energy
Dragon released
too much for the timid and the weak

Almost, 9/3/20

The papers are in, almost, whatever happened to your smile?
The papers are in, almost, I haven't seen it for a while
I'm a doll broken discarded

you're a husk exposed despondent
 The River flows and splashes stays and bashes and you and I are through
 It doesn't matter how many times there have been many when you and I have been cruel
 I'm a dull broken discarded my scales have wizened and hardened, almost, almost
 So I'll take a left with no right, and you'll take escape with no fight
 Graves need tending so I'll light you on fire, spread your ashes where I buried my desire
 And in the fall the leaves will come down
 And in the fall I will rise
 Almost, almost

Fantasy Be Gone, 8/2/20

Did we ever love? Or was I deep in sleep
 flying from above, you were never deep
 flying towards the light, bashing at the bulb
 blinded by my sight, thinking I was bold
 be kind to me, as I am to you, or show me your back, as you tend to do
 could we see beyond what I preyed upon?
 Doesn't matter now, fantasy be gone
 fantasy begone fantasy begone fantasy be gone
 Bee caught me today, reaching for her prize
 must it be this way hiding now in lies
 I will be a moth no more, I'll take another form
 shake the poison from my wings, I was meant for better things
 be kind to me, as I am to you, or show me your back, as you tend to do
 fantasy begone fantasy begone fantasy be gone

Blackbird (Beatles Cover), 2/5/20

Wasp and Bee, 4/25/20

Wasp on my back, wasp on my back wasp on my back don't come back
 Wasp on my hair Wasp on my hair Wasp on my hair it's not fair
 Owl in tree Owl in tree Owl in tree come to me
 Eagle on wind eagle on wind eagle on wind let me in
 Sweet little be sweet little bee sweet little bee we are free

Shape-Shifting (Poem), 10/10/20

Shape shifting in grass
 reality shows and knows what's real.
 Rooster snaps bundles of jumbled spoons amongst dripping forests falling in despair.
 Crows know. They've got lots to say.

Sun knows. It shows the way and makes the shadows hold close, even under pen where ashes gather. Ashes fly. They find their new why. They find their next, hopscotching past my lap as if I'm too jaunty to hold them, too flush to stick the landing.

Yellow jackets' final bow, the sweet. The berry. The ashes. The many nights same as last but colder, smokier somehow. Moving from leaf to leaf, tasting, peeking under, peeking through, nosing around.

Shape shifters need nothing but shift sight. Things look the same—add Tree from above to below. Being takes a breath to rabbit racing from owl racing from time, racing towards night when flight is silenced by the darkness, when silent flight turns night around from shadow moon, forest floor darker, then light, sight sharp as tongues tasting war. Sharp as honeysuckle and relief. The waiting is yes. The swooping is yes. The missing is yes. The catching is yes. The seeing is yes. The watching is yes. The sleeping is yes. There is no “no“, no “ knowing “.

Moth Song (Improv), 7/18/20

Show Me (Improv), 10/25/20 w/Michael Schurter (music and piano)

You're wondering which way to go
 you're not sure this is what it seems to be but
 maybe this time will last in a way that leads you back to now
 always looking for a path, perhaps we don't need to find were already there so
 show me, show me, show me, show me, show me
 we can't find a way
 we can be all the ways
 we can find a root like forest trees
 we can find a bridge to land upon
 we can find a Sky to soar within
 we don't need a why please, just
 show me, show me, show me, show me, show me

We, 1/26/19

First?
 No first, just meaning
 carrying, heavy light
 reach, reach for the air
 we are tiny, tiny pulse, a must be
 Light friend, find We, is this lost?
 No couldn't be
 “You” what is this meaning?
 We are only, all deep deep, dark death

lightning next, sun friend, sister friend, friend moss, friend moon, friend leaves
 You are we, no "to be" no "couldn't be"
 love, love
 survive survive
 human We, furry We,
 speak, speak to We and listen, listen, listen
 Listening

I Want Snow, 1/18/21

Good girl waiting heart in throat
 sheets left on for nighttime holds
 we dodged disaster no one's hurt
 being bad, doing what I'm told

I want snow, I want snow

yet sun holds on like aging breaks
 and Blue Jay songs harsh and bold places touched now empty aches
 Fleeting fire and creeping cold

I want snow, I want snow

so I'll be brave and walk the maze
 courting wolves and being deer (dear)
 spent weeks and weeks in a sex haze
 playful shadows welcome fear

I want snow, I want snow

now bunnies huddle 2 feet down
 who's the hunter and who's the prey?
 And fingers rest at least for now
 open up and have a taste

I wanted to snow and I got it
 now I want you
 I want to snow and I got it
 now I'll have you

Moss (w/ Reticence) 4/25/20 (Music: Aaron Riverwood)

Time billows
 ripple home
 moss growing
 creeping slow, creeping slow

peak your head out little one
moon to sun, moon to Sun
Lava wood
flowing robes
acorn red
finding home
again, again
Cracked open
resting rot
Risks taken, fevered hot
Crumbling worlds
just under foot
above expanse
leaves and dirt

Just the Beginning 10/2/20

Just the beginning, we haven't even started yet

The Only Time (NIN Cover), Recorded 6/13/21

I'm drunk
And right now I'm so in love with you
And I don't want to think too much about what we should or shouldn't do
Lay my hands on heaven and the sun and the moon and the stars
While the devil wants to fuck me in the back of his car
Nothing quite like the feel of something new
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up in you
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up in you

I swear
I just found everything I need
The sweat in your eyes the blood in your veins are listening to me
Well I want to rip it up and swim in it until I drown
My moral standing is lying down
Nothing quite like the feel of something new
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up in you
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up
Maybe I'm all messed up in you

This is the only time I really feel alive
This is the only time I really feel alive

Things are Beginning (at the End) 10/21/20

I went to the forest today and guess what she said
she told me that I wasn't meant to be wed

this was an obvious thing and I wasn't sure why
she was telling me something I was sure of already

she said I didn't see it, I should open my eyes
she said I couldn't see it, and I'm always surprised

nothing is always is it, and nothing's the same
nothing is always is it, and no one's to blame

I found a way to pick up the path
I found a way to break up the math
1+1 is one and 2+2
1+1 is one, and then there's you

I found a hawk today and found three more
they found me too and we opened the door, we opened the door

Then Blue Jay told me something I couldn't deny
Blue Jay told me something I didn't ask why
I didn't ask why

if you knew me you'd recognize that this was a win
if you knew me you'd recognize that things are beginning at the end

Things are Beginning (at the End) 10/21/20

"I like to think the animals have some sort of interest in me that I'm chosen or special
I often ask them to visit me hoping that they can prove to me that I'm important but I'm
wondering, or imagining, that it's very different than that
Owl for instance is just doing Owl stuff and because I'm doing Owl stuff too, I see her
this is another way of being versus need to feel chosen or special externally
earlier in our walk I cried a little bit thinking about how grateful I was for the woods and the
trees and then, well it was less that they were doing something for me of course, it was that they
were being, that I was in the woods with all these beings and I was also being and we were being
together and I felt in full alignment
I felt held in being, not being something external for others, but through the experience of being
and seeing other beings also being

It makes me think that it's not about being chosen, it's about resonance, and I suppose resonance is the same thing as synchronicity in a way, isn't it? but you don't have to wait for others to choose you, using this paradigm you have to choose you and maybe that's part of freedom as well

I was just saying out loud to myself that it's OK for me to feel confident in the woods, it's not being cocky and as I was thinking this about confidence a Blue Jay flew across our trail and landed on a tree right next to us, hi Blue Jay

today is filled with Magick, one timeline has ended and a new one has begun

nature has more proof than science could ever gather, science attempts to gather evidence from nature, but nature doesn't have to attempt to gather evidence, because nature is reality and therefore nature is above science, it's actual, you can see it

one hawk flew above me and another landed in a tree and I was thinking, synchronicities happen, and you can argue and say "well, I spend more time in the woods and am looking up" but maybe it's not that they don't happen, maybe it's that they happen all the time and we just don't notice them because we're not tuned in another Blue Jay just flew across our path and then I asked Blue Jay what she was trying to say and she just started talking, not in people words, but in a different Blue Jay call, I don't know what that means, I don't think I need to know what it means

I noticed two more hawks on the way home, those hawks didn't choose me, part of what's happening may be that I'm in hawk mind and part may be that this is just part of her day and I just happen to be here either way, either way"

Python's Nest 10/6/20

Taking too much space, or are you?
 Bourbon tongue, firm lips
 wrapped too close, or are you? Pressing holding, yes.
 You are not them, you are not me
 you are not the future past, you are not me
 carry over, so many nights
 with fewer times to compare against
 mark the page to document
 will I be yours? When I stay mine?
 maybe yes, maybe no, maybe now, maybe go
 Found yourself in Python's nest
 with leg so long, so far to fall
 so close, so close, so close and yet so far
 maybe yes, maybe no, maybe now, maybe go
 Maybe, maybe, maybe, you never know

Daddy Long Legs, 7/5/20

My body knows what I know not
 my body holds what you don't want
 holding molding moving shaking aching
 holding molding moving shaking aching
 I found I have found I am found here now

you in clouds of rain rain rain rain pain
 you in clouds of rain rain rain rain pain
 I am of my body I am fire I am of my body I am dire
 I am of my body I am Ashes carrying the one, carrying the one
 carrying the one, carrying the one
 I am Wolf and Eagle I am Tree
 I am Crow and Rabbit I am me
 long long legs and long long arms and hidden charms
 long long legs and long long arms and hidden charms
 I am Bee and Bear and Owl and I am Deer (dear)
 I am Bee and Bear and Owl and I am Deer (dear)
 I am a me me me me me me me of me
 I am a tree tree tree tree tree tree tree tree tree
 shadow road is calling and I say
 shadow road is calling and if I may
 yes yes yes yes yes yes yes to me
 yes yes yes yes yes yes yes to Be

Howl in the Deep, 11/28/20

I flew to the house, surrounded by wolves, deep in the forest shade
 landing on the sill, I waited until the shadowy figure let me in
 Old as the moon, dark as a fright, the crone shifted into a crow

She filled up the room, much larger than doom, dwarfing the window we had flown into
 Her epic wings bound and darker than sound, she yearned to return to the night
 So finding my fire, I burned out the roof and the giant crow quickly escaped
 then taking flight, I burned the house down, I burned that house down to the earth

The wolves walked away and I asked them why, why did they leave her there to die?
 Wolf said: Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you're asleep
 So I let out a howl, I howled and howled and Wolf said: This is the answer you seek

Later, deep in a dream, the wily and strange pull of the mind beckoned me
 I returned to the house, it was lousy with blame, lousy with regret and shame
 The curse begged me to stay and I couldn't look away yet I knew this time I would awaken
 And soon enough, that's just what I did, and Wolf she repeated to me:

Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you're asleep
 Abandon the why, howl in the deep, the mind is the place you're asleep

Appendix D – Magick Talk (and Olive Too)

Because I was mostly hiking in the woods when talking, my hollering at Magick was also transcribed; for fun, I included it here instead of interspersed in the narrative. Olive the poodle is Magick's friend and bodyguard who came with us on many hikes but is very well behaved, hence not mentioned that often!

[Magick come over here come here good boy yes yes yes yes yes yes yes oh good boy so proud of my boy so proud of him] [This way Magick] [Magick Magick Magick.] [Madgey] [oh Magick with the mud ugh] [Magick this way Magick come on come on Madgey Magick] [Magick Magick get over here hey hey hey hey stop it] [Yes Madge] [Magick Magick oh shit there are all kinds of noises here in the woods the trees are squealing my dog is nowhere in sight, I thought it was a goose but it's a tree, hello tree, oh my gosh it's making so much noise hi great if you don't fall on me, and quiet, here they are again when the wind comes in] [hold on a second Magick this way this way Madge Magick] [no, Magick, Jesus.] [Magick Magick Magick hi good boy do you want cookies yeah cookies Madge yeah shake it off shake it off] [you OK madge?] [Olive over here, good girl good girl] [Madgie Magick come here there's a dog howling Magick come here Magick. There's a lot of crying my dog is trying to run to the rescue nurse Madge come here Bubba come you're a good boy yes OK we'll check it out good job buddy you're the best] [Madgey come here come here Bubba Madge cookies Magick Magick Magick hey wait wait for me Magick wait for me good for you I just want to... good doggy good doggy wait Magick Magick Magick hey OK] [good boy Madgey] [Come on you're a good doggie why do doggies always give you a hard time as you ... come here this way come on come on up up up up up good boy go on go on go on go on up there can you please good good] [hi Bubba] [Magick Magick Madge come here buddy] [Olive Olive Olive Olive come on come over here good girl good girl good girl yeah shake it off shake it off shake it off you wanna cookie for that do you wanna cookie yeah this is how we do it right guys? yeah. Well that was exciting] [leave it leave it Magick fucking disgusting oh my god oh my god he's in a pile of shit you're absolutely fucking Magick drop it you're so gross drop that right fucking now.]

Appendix E – Pre and Post Attachment Assessments

I did online attachment assessments <https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/ECR.php> from the perspective of my adult self with partner and child self with self early in my dissertation process (2nd week) and late in my dissertation process (4/20/21). On June 14, 2021, I did another assessment with child self to self and with adult self to partner and to self. On this day it seemed I had increased attachment disturbance with my partner but increased security with adult self to self.

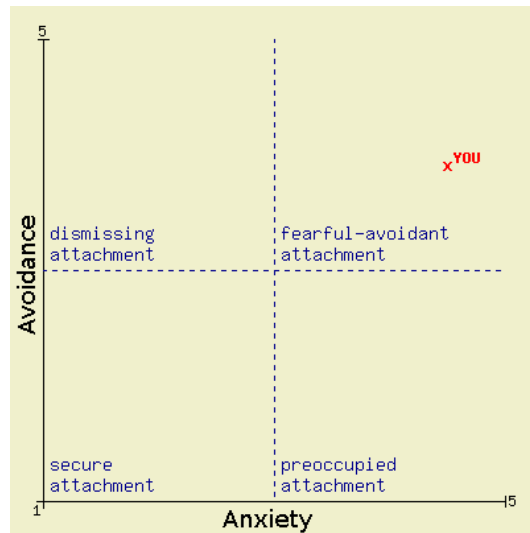
Early-Dissertation Results from Child Self (10 years old): 9/13/20 Experiences in Close Relationships (Brennan, Clarke Shaver, 1998).

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 3.9, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 4.5, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



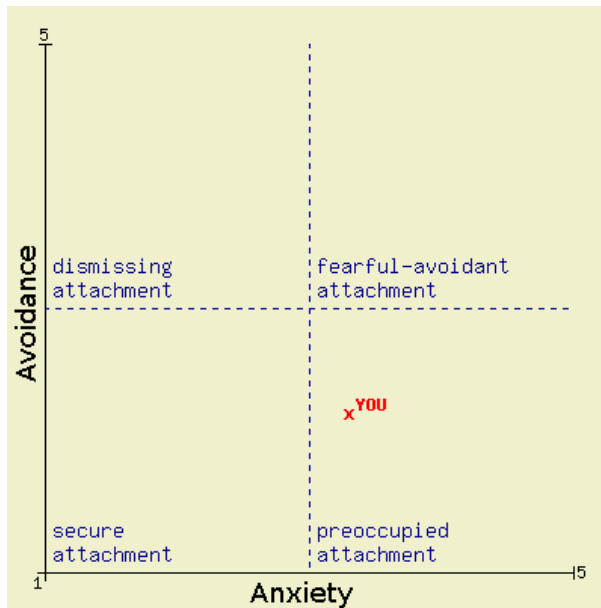
Late-Dissertation Results from Child Self (10yrs old): 4/20/21

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 2.2, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 3.3, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



Early-Dissertation Results from Adult Self: 9/13/20 Experiences in Close Relationships

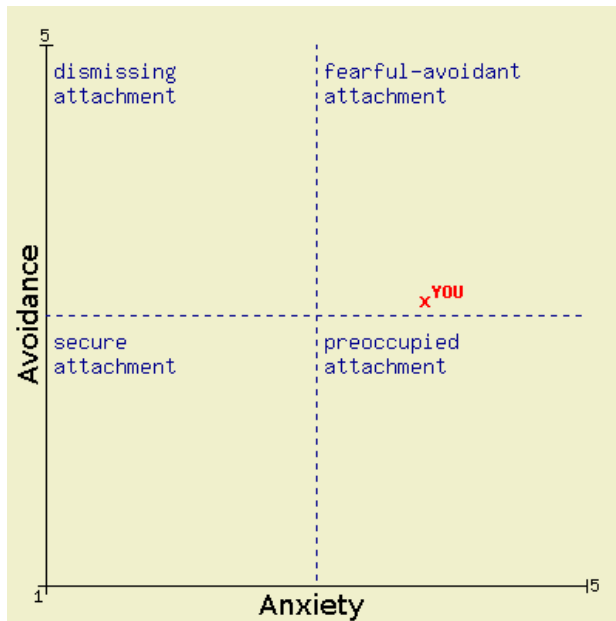
(Brennan et. al, 1998).

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 3.1, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for anxiety was 3.8, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



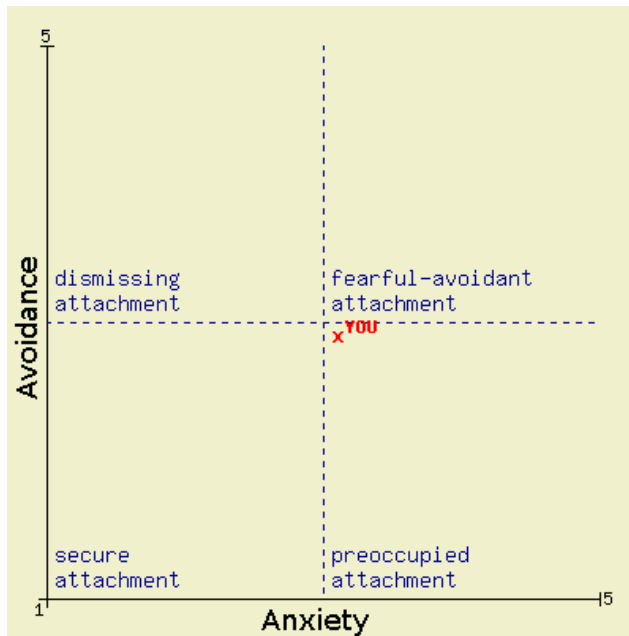
Late-Dissertation Results from adult self with partners: 4/20/21

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 2.9, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 3.1, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



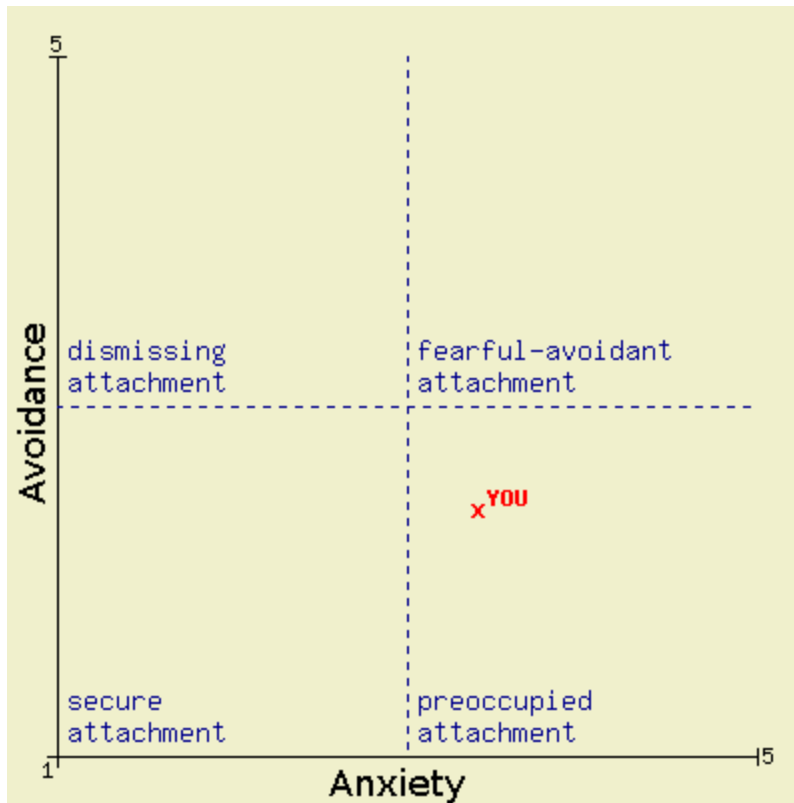
Late- Dissertation Child Assessment with Self: 6/14/21

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 2.4, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 3.4, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



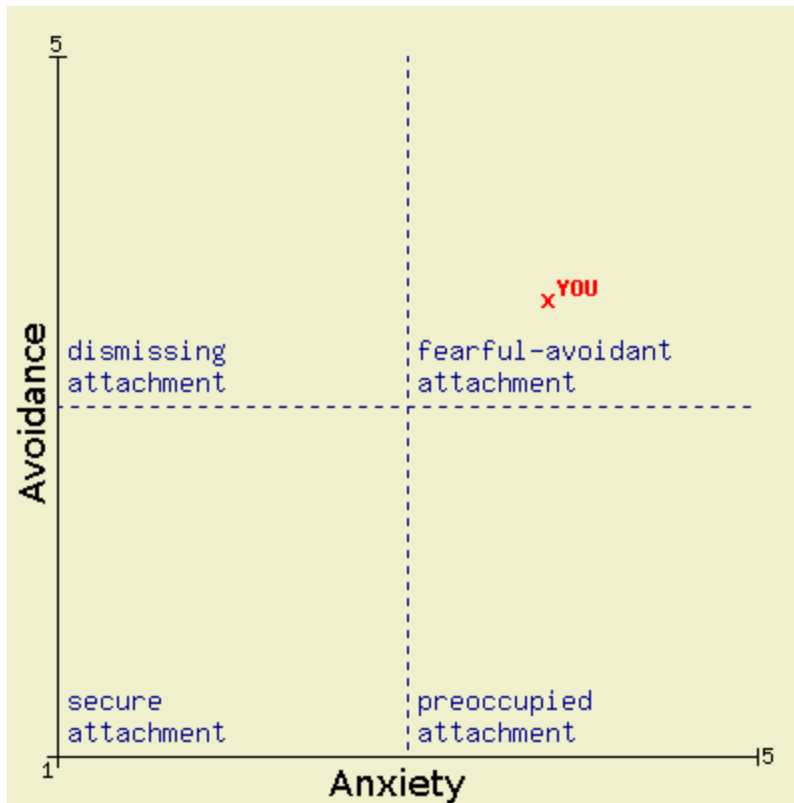
Late- Dissertation Adult self with Partner: 6/14/21

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 3.6, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 3.8, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



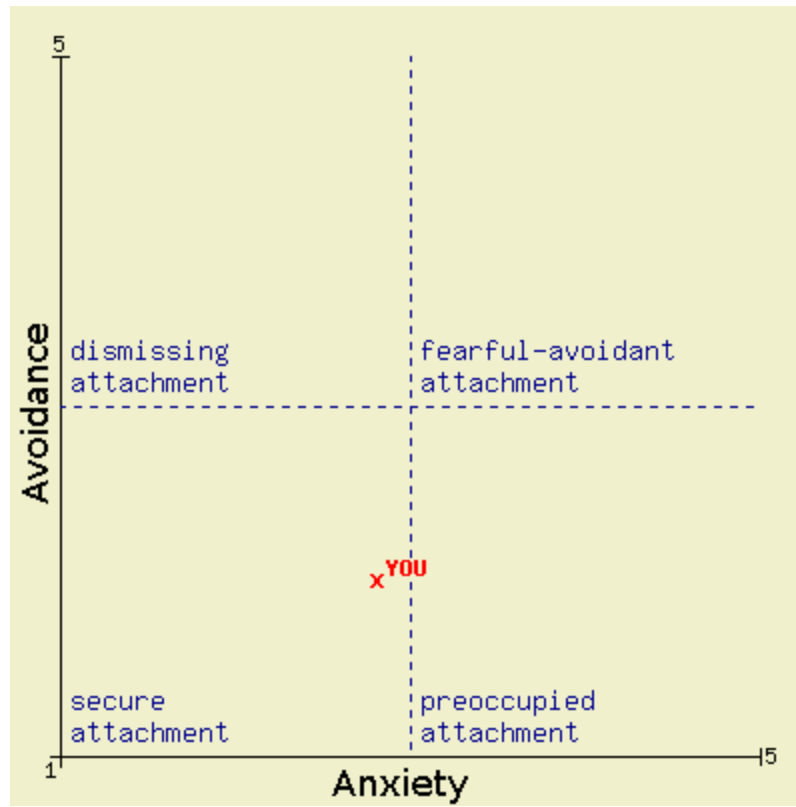
Late- Dissertation Adult self with Self: 6/14/21

The test is complete, it scores you along two scales (scores are between one and five):

Your score for **avoidance** was 2, this personality trait is related to how much you are unwilling to allow yourself to be vulnerable to your partner. High scorers do not like to open up to others. Low scorers share their feelings freely.

Your score for **anxiety** was 2.8, this personality trait is related to how much you worry about your partner paying attention to you. People who score high on this trait frequently worry about, and are dissatisfied with, the attention they receive [*sic*]. Low scorers tend not to worry about this.

Your two scores can be plotted to yield your "attachment style", see the chart below.



Appendix F - Permission

From: Aaron Riverwood
[REDACTED]

Subject: release

Date: Aug 15, 2021 at 5:40:19 PM

To: Rachel Riverwood [REDACTED]

August 15, 2021

Dear Rachel -

This constitutes written permission to use our co-written song "Moss" in your dissertation, including its listing in two open source databases (AURA and OhioLINK) and the commercial database (ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis).

Best,

Aaron Tieger Riverwood

From: Michael Schurter

Subject: Written Permission

Date: Aug 14, 2021 at 11:24:23 AM

To: Rachel Riverwood

Dear Rachel -

This constitutes written permission to use our co-written song "Show Me" in your dissertation, including its listing in two open source databases (AURA and OhioLINK) and the commercial database (ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis).

Best,

Michael Schurter